one

life

eupribeag.com
One life

by eupribeag.com
“First adventure”

Early morning up in the mountains of South America just before the first sunlight. I’m putting my right knee on the ground facing the horizon from where sun will rise and while I imagine a Knight Templar in the same position giving his prayers to the Lord in face of a large wooden cross, I’m feeling sharp pains, like tiny sharp knives passing through my femurs and back muscles, pains which cross my entire body all the way to the top of my head. A couple of weeks have passed since I’m travelling through the deep jungle of the Amazon trying to reach the rooftop of Brazil, Pico de Neblina. Like the name says, there is a lot of fog and moisture around this part of the world. Now I’m sitting above it, the best viewpoint over the highest peaks all around. My trekking boots still resist, but looking at the heels I can see both are showing signs of fatigue. Trousers are indispensable in the jungle, especially for us Europeans, the more pockets, the better!

Last night, descending not more than five hundred meters from the top, I found a small piece of flat land next to a huge boulder which provided some protection from wind. It was enough to set up my tent and have a deep and comfortable night sleep. Up here, where sun is a blessing, at over 2500m altitude, the temperatures which my body feels are dictated by rain, wind, sun and most of the times all three happening in the same time, that’s why sometimes just a simple t-shirt is enough, other times all the equipment which I have for protection it’s not enough to keep myself dry and warm. I do enjoy wearing always on my head a cap, baseball type, since I find it very useful to protect myself from sun and rain alike.

Seconds passed until the first strong sunshine met my eyes, moment when I have to close them instantly. It wasn’t enough though, somehow this first genuine sunlight has the power to pass through
my eyelids and force me to squeeze them harder. I’m lowering my head just enough so my cap’s front part will act as a shield. Slowly I manage to relax my eyes looking into the ground while the increasing light reveals the beauty of both Brazil and Venezuela mountain landscapes. I’m forcing myself to look into the light, but it is pointless, from the corners of my eyes tears are starting to form instantly while I squeeze them once more to open only when my head is lowered again. I feel like the sun tells me his power is unbeatable no matter how small is his presence and the only thing which I could think of in this moment, was God… and I whispered:

“I looked for You in the holiest places of this Earth…and haven’t found You!”

While saying that flashbacks from previous journeys to The Holy Mountain Athos in Greece, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, Sinai Mountain and big cathedrals take me back ...

“Instead, here, in the wildest part of the world which I’ve seen so far, I’m seeing You everyday.”

Last two weeks through Amazonian rainforests were seriously challenging, roads are not exactly roads, are more like semidry river beds which most of the time are flooded. When I was lucky hitchhiking even with a 4x4 SUV was hard to pass through some of these muddy and sticky places, walking was harder still. Trails are not quite trails, but I felt lucky enough when trail was nothing else but a small and narrow wet creek, still quite difficult to follow. Sleeping places are not quite five stars hotels, are more like two beams hanged up in trees from where hammocks can be tied up, that’s the best and most common way of sleeping. If there's an improvised roof, well... that’s a treat. If no place for hammock, just a simple tent is always the best choice. Lots of hours on water, changing boats to follow my direction, never with enough time to get completely dry, but what was really difficult was to do it alone most of the times.
I’m deciding to get up on two feet struggling to ignore the pain and to grab my backpack which is already prepared to take his comfortable place, on my back. After all this time I feel like a snail carrying its entire house on its own back. Just before lifting it up my, I give, as always, thanks to the place itself by reaching my hand forward, like in a benediction act, over the imprint left on the ground by my tent’s base:

“Thank you for keeping me safe over this night!”

I’m wearing bicycle type gloves and looking at the imprint I can also see my fingers with yellow-reddish dirt beneath and around my finger nails, mixed with green vegetation which looks rather more black. I truly need a long hot shower...and probably much more!

I’m lifting up my surviving tool - a machete and tiding it up to my hip I’m starting to descend slowly. It seems I’m on a trail, but it is the type of trail where is needed to use all trekking skills to stay on it. On these wild places these trails are rarely used and vegetation needs only days to cover any sign of their existence. So far I can see it clearly all the way to the next rainforest ahead, but the fog starts to lift up through the valleys making the visibility drop. With all the gear on me I’m starting to descent slowly, not knowing how long it will take me to find the first Venezuelan village or tribe. I know that Venezuela, besides Spanish as official language, has also at least forty recognised indigenous languages. One of the most known tribe is Pemon, I’ve met them several years ago on my first visit, and they alone are speaking five languages. Two weeks I’ve lived among them in National Park Canaima where I’ve learned so many new things from those short guys. This community is amazing in so many ways, the respect for life and nature is taught since their early days of childhood and I’m sure I’m going to meet them again somehow, somewhere. Well, it’s kind of impossible not to since I’m entering in their territory and their territorial sense is at very high levels. And when I’m saying territorial I really mean that in order to pass or to
stay on these lands, I'll be needing the permission of Casiqe - tribe chief. That's the guy who can guarantee my safe passage. But first I need the permission to enter... it’s always a surprise!

Walking down the mountain, first slowly and then faster and faster, it took me less than thirty minutes to get rid of my muscle pains completely, i guess my blood did his job and cleaned my muscles. I’ve waited for sunlight so I can start descending because first thing which I've learned inside the jungle, after spending first night, is that you don’t walk when dark! And I'm not talking about the hundredths of sentient species who might harm me, or my mind in some cases, it's enough to say everything it’s still wet all around so I have to focus where I’m stepping constantly. First rule in wilderness is protection, protection in order to stay safe, slippery wet rocks, wet leaves, wet branches, wet roots, muddy soil, perfect scenario for causing a mild ankle rupture and if alone, things can get very complicated. What’s interesting on this trail in particular are the shapes left by nature during millions of years of erosion on surrounding rocks and boulders looking like human faces, mushrooms, trees, animal shapes, huge boulders which appear to be in weak equilibrium and trail passes right underneath them, perfect place to challenge my imagination reminding me also of that flat plateau summit of Roraima Mountain, same mountain which inspired Conan Doyle to write his science fiction novel “The lost world”. Too bad the fog is getting trickier by the minute, otherwise I would have taken some pictures. Especially around here, and especially among the indigenous, culture of climbing mountains is still far away from our own. Although they are doing a perfect job as guides, it is still hard for them to cope with this idea. Sometimes I ask myself the same thing and not only because I'm often questioned, but it's impossible not to do it even from a humoristic perspective. Every time I’m questioning myself about that, I always end up having the same answer and it's a very simple one – I have no clue! All I know is I've had my bad moments being
already on top of a mountain, but the journey to get there is always memorable. I also have moments when probably my body's oldest threads feel like returning home, meeting after a long time its kind, meeting my roots, my ancestors. Yes, I do love mountains!

Equally important as the body is the mind and most of the times, ascending or descending a mountain, my mind gets clear, sometimes I have only one single thought all the way. It’s a sort of meditation and it helps a lot, especially on long distances. A very efficient method to ease the effort is to listen to music, any kind of music, unfortunately, today my phone is low on energy and that means no music for now. My accumulator is completely empty, I’ve used its last drops of energy to power my video camera in the previous day when I took some photos and shoot a short video on top of Pico de Neblina. I’m always capturing videos for my friends and for my old days to come. Now I'm using a pretty good video camera which is able to catch very clear images from far distances. I remember when I started doing this for the first time with a 1 kilo 4K Sony... one day before starting this long journey. It was the very first time when I was holding a video camera in my face like in a selfie moment and also the first time when I was doing it in English language. I was so bad at both! All my life I was against this trend of photo taking everywhere, afterwards selfie trend infuriated me even more. But there I was holding in one hand a video camera and doing a first video about my childhood places which in my mind represented the starting point of this journey. Moreover, I’ve never studied English language in none of the schools which I've attended, I'm part of French & German generation, and still there I was doing this video in some kind of English language which stuck with me for many videos. And if I would have mastered English language at that point, I would have probably chosen Chinese language. Oh boy, it was a very cruel lesson of humility and I enjoyed every second of it!
Pico da Neblina stands in the north-west of Brazil at a height of 2,994 metres above sea level and represents the highest point for this country, very close to the border with Venezuela. Much closer to Venezuelan land are Pico 31 Macon (2,973m) and Pico Phelps (2,992m), peaks which I have to cross in order to pass, illegally this time because there's no border control on these pristine lands, into Venezuela. After I'll pass the border, relief should go a bit lower because here in the south of Venezuela first peak is Cerro de la Neblina with only 1,145 metres although Venezuela's highest point is Bolivar peak in north-west with almost 5,000 metres above sea level. It's not the first time when I'm passing borders like this, bureaucracy kills me every time special permit is required and if would have been required I don't think anybody would have been approved it in the first place. Usually authorities get really mad but in the end they will help with everything and if not, in worst case scenario, I'll get several months, hopefully not years, interdiction to return into Venezuela. I’m heading for a beautiful waterfall, opposite Angel Falls, I know it under the name La Catira Falls but the local name is Bride's Veil Falls and first I need to reach at river valley Mavaca, one of Orinoco's river first tributaries in Amazon county of Venezuela. What I'm hoping is to find a small commercial airplane which can fly me from Amazon county somewhere in Bolivar County, biggest of Venezuela, and from there I'll find a way to reach this waterfall. I’ve seen it when I was visiting for the first time the highest waterfall in the world, Angel Falls, and when I saw it from distance, I promised myself that next time I’ll be here I’ll visit this mysterious place again. Until today I’m not sure what attracts me the most, its beauty or the place itself, a totally pristine one, where Devil’s Canyon separates these two amazing waterfalls. It happened in 2019, when president Maduro decided to close the borders with Brazil, one of the only two countries along with Colombia, which represented singles gates for Venezuelan population to bring food and medication inside their country in a continuously struggle to survive.
A strong and active population struggling also against the effects of the abuse of authority of probably all militarized structures plus highly disputed US commercial and financial blockade. First protest in Caracas against president Maduro and pro newly declared interim president Guaido caught me inside the country and in the first 24 hours authorities killed 24 people and injured hundreds, if not more. It was hard to move around the country as a tourist and also hard to find food. Using ATM's was out of the question, volatility of their Soberano currency was very high and Petro crypto currency turned out to be since 2018 a total fiasco. I managed to have two crazy experiences though, Angel Falls and Mount Roraima, despite the lack of both security and especially food.

When I have enough time to kill I still continue to watch, sometimes with naivety, other times just for fun, TV documentaries about surviving in wilderness. On TV everything seems to be at hand, especially finding food. In reality it’s not like that at all, edible fruits or roots are not quite at every step and to have just a small chance to get close enough to an animal, lots of time and energy is needed... and all this without taking into consideration skills and tools. Another name for most of northern side of the Amazon basin is Guyana Highlands and in Amerindian language means "land of many waters" so, of course, fishing is at hand. In one of the above mentioned documentaries I've seen how one tribe uses a poisonous juice of a particular tree by smashing its roots into a small creek and clearly killing everything that touched it, big and small, young or old. I see a huge similarity between this procedure and the stupid one when electricity is used for the same purpose. A very clean and fast way to catch two-three fish, more than enough for one person, I learned from Pemons and all is needed are few leafs of a specific plant and one particular insect. It takes three days to ferment the mixture of these two ingredients and what comes out is used to make small balls which once thrown in water, where hungry fish are present, will
knock them out. It's a very effective and fast technique which I ended up calling it “ancient Pemon technology”. They know lots of other methods, but what's most important is that they all got the skills and the physical power to protect nature too.

There's a habit on the Amazon river, especially on the most circulated channels, and very often seen on the second lower half of the river: indigenous, male or female, young or old, living in their apparently floating houses hidden at the edge of the flooded forest, are jumping in their canoes and start paddling dangerously close to big ships which are transporting people, cars and all kinds of products. Right here in this next episode I've seen and understood how come these indigenous get to become so resilient: travelling from Santarem to Belem, a three days journey down the river Amazon, I was up on the deck watching how tens of canoes are making their way through the muddy waters to get as close as possible to our ship. One of the reasons is to receive free food from the passengers who are buying food before departing especially for this event. Unmistakably there's a form of contest among them, who's getting closer to the ship, who's faster, who's resilient. Several minutes passed since the ship reduced its speed, probably to prevent any possible accidents, meanwhile passengers were throwing food wrapped up in plastic bags which once touched waters would float until first indigenous would grab it. It's not much in those plastic bags, usually Brazilian street food - a bit of meat and salad and a lot of rice, but for those guys is food for at least one day. My attention was drawn by two canoes, one smaller than the other, having each only one boat man. Both were kids, the bigger one I don't think was more than 12 years old and the youngest probably around 8 years old. Someone from the deck bellow released a small plastic bag on their side of the river and they both started paddling in the same time from their improvised pier which was half underwater in front of their house from where more people were watching the ship with
curiosity. This so called house was nothing else than a bunch of wooden boards used for walls and covered with iron coils. Nothing else! No electricity for most of them, just a twenty square meters box which might keep them dry in bad weather, are called “palafitos". This is how most of the houses here look like, maybe with the exception of floating churches or assembly houses which seemed to look a bit better. And yes, God is present in these isolated and time forgotten places... Both brothers were struggling to be first in their heist to reach the plastic bag and after a few moves, bigger brother was ahead with his entire canoe length. It was so visible, especially from the top of the deck where I was, how the youngster was trying his best to keep up with his brother. Seemed useless because his brother was clearly winning this race and in a similar situation other kids would give up, but not him. He peddled as fast as he could and I believe his brother finally noticed it, so he allowed him to get close and eventually let him have this so desired gift. The happiness on this kid's smiling face in plain sun was priceless, no words to describe it... In exactly that moment I understood how come these people achieve their robustness.

I do not poses their robustness, so I have to stop to eat something, sun is already on top of the sky and I'm walking for more than three hours through valleys to avoid climbing the last two peaks. I know all I have left are two chocolate bars and cassava bread. Cassava is a type of round-shaped flat bread made from cassava or manioc flour and very famous around the Amazon due to its properties, very close to potatoes and a major source of carbohydrates. I’m deciding to eat one chocolate bar and some bits of cassava...and to rest for a while. Usually I'm using an offline map which shows always my position being very useful when trails or roads exist on maps. But not here, not from the top of Pico da Neblina towards Venezuela because here I am outside the map, I am outside the grid. It took me another six hours, from which half with dense fog, to pass into Venezuelan
territory, Amazon County and to find a small shop which apparently sells products to miners who are working in the area. I was surprised to find this establishment in the middle of nowhere, but later on I found out it's quite common around here. Undoubtedly gold is the best currency here, but all I have left are some Brazilian reals in my pocket and some small bills of US dollars which are always helpful in crisis situations and my first attempt is to get rid of the left reals. In Venezuela the cheapest product which can be bought is always a small hot coffee, so I'm entering inside through a wooden door which was barely hanging in its hinges. The interior is almost completely dark, one light ball is slightly lighting over a dirty counter behind of which an overweight guy stands talking with an indigenous over the counter. A bit of daylight is coming inside through three small windows with thick bars. The counter is immediately on the left as I’m entering and it’s continuing with shelves on the entire length of the wall. With two long tables and few chairs, sign that at one point of the day a number of people will populate them, that's pretty much everything. Pooling the door behind me and trying to close it without success I see their eyebrows lifting up with a surprised look on their faces, definitely surprised to see me there. Without realising on the spot that I have to switch from Portuguese language to Spanish I give the salute:

“Bom dia!”

Their reaction was speechless, I’m realising they understood in a second from where I was coming from and they just returned to their dialogue in probably one of their forty indigenous languages, without any reply. I have an urge of charging my gadgets with a little bit of energy and before I’ll choose a seat I’m scanning fast the room for a socket. Nothing...yet, but starting from the light ball I can see another wire which goes across the room following the main beam all the way to the other side. That's the place where I'll seat! I'm heading to this spot releasing my backpack on the floor when it hits
me I was the rude one using Portuguese instead of Spanish language. So I’m heading back towards the counter and this time I’m saluting properly:

“Buenas tarde!”.

Both turned their heads to me and I continued in my bad Spanish:

”Disculpen, Señores! Ustedes son las primeras personas que conozco en mucho tiempo!”

And we all start laughing, both of them revealing their bad teeth, understanding they are the first Spanish speakers since Brazil.

“Que podemos hacer por ti, Gringo?” replies the guy behind the counter.

This kind of reply I would usually consider it extremely polite without the word “Gringo" at the end, though. In South and Central American countries is applied for all North Americans, but in the last decades it's applied to all foreigners, most of the times not in a good manner. Best example is from some Arabic countries, especially from Levant. There's a concept called “white skin commission” which implies all foreigners should pay more for everything starting with the price for a coffee all the way to a ticket for visiting a National Museum. It's so wrong because not all foreigners are rich and what’s worse is that, with no benefice at all, they create this unnecessary gap between people. Science already demonstrated there's no pure human race, we're all a bunch of mestizos regardless of skin colour and body features and I hope one day its voice will start advocate stronger. When I realized this for the first time, many years ago, at first I was mad at people and it took me a while to understand it's not entirely their fault, most of the blame goes to governmental policies. It’s almost impossible not to be disturbed when you pay at least ten times more than a local for an entry fee to any important touristic site. And if this isn't uncomfortable, it will be when applied to
everything else! On the other hand, this situation becomes funnier in countries where they just started to educate population about discrimination and are advertising this concept in different ways. I remember one answer received when, just for the fun of it, I confronted one supervisor in a museum in La Paz, Bolivia: “Yes, we support fight against discrimination, but between us...Bolivians!” Although it happened in probably one of the top countries in South America when it comes to traditions and conservative views, it’s still funny. And when they are calling you “Gringo” usually they mean “Gringo rico”. And I might accept to be a “Gringo”, but definitely not a rich one. I’m struggling with myself not to react to this name and I'm answering:

“Quiero una tassa de cafe, por favor, y si es posible me gustaria cargar mi telefono?/ I want a coffee, please, and if it is possible I would like to charge my phone?”

“Aceptas reales brasileños?”

He was expecting this question and while pouring hot coffee into a plastic cup, replies:

”Si Gringo, dos reales! Y tienes azucar en la mesa!”

“Gracias, Senores!”

Well, so far so good, a hot drink and access to electricity for two Brazilian reals it's a good deal in the middle of nowhere. I’m paying for the coffee, take it and back to where my backpack was resting. In Venezuela electricity has different sockets than Brazil, so I'm searching for the proper plug to connect my phone first. While I’m waiting for it to get alive and trying my hot coffee after adding a bit of sugar, my eyes rests on a sign saying here's free Wi-Fi...unbelievable!!! But let's stay calm, it might be just an old sign. After a few moments my phone is ready to be turned on and opening Wi-Fi networks there it is, one network available!
I’m heading back to the counter to ask for password but I was sure I have to buy more than a coffee to get it. So I’m asking for “almuerzo” or lunch, question which made the guy behind the counter to stand up and in the same moment from behind a dirty curtain which separates the shop from a possible kitchen, a woman with beautiful face features makes her entrance with a smile on her face and says:

”Hay sopa y segundo pollo con arroz y fideo!”

I was surprised of her appearance; everybody knows Venezuelan women are incredibly beautiful, and very surprised too of her lunch offer. I’m incredibly hungry and my brain is already in feast mode making my body became anxious for it.

“Senora, eso es una buena noticia! Por favor!” i’m saying while i’m laughing with both corners of my mouth all the way to my ears.

In my mind hot steam lifting up from a soup bowl is everything that I need. This lady smiles back to me and quickly turns around and through the same dirty curtain disappears instantly. With all this new ecstatic moment I almost forgot my purpose is to ask for Wi-Fi password. I'm turning towards the counter:

“Disculpa senor, preciso la contrasena por internet, por favor!”

As he was still standing, when hearing this request, replies while humping his tall chair behind the counter:

“Si Gringo, pero tienes que pagar por uso de internet!”

I knew immediately what he was trying to do by asking to pay for it.

“Lo siento Senor, pero si estoy comprando tambien el almuerzo, esto deberia ser suficiente para veinte minutos de internet gratis, no es asi?”

Until he had time to answer my question, from behind the curtain, same lady and probably his wife, comes out handing me a piece of
paper on which the password was barely visible. I’m smiling back to her and ask:

”Seguro?”

“Si, mi amor!” she replies and turns towards him changing her smiling face into one not very friendly.

He instead, with a visible ashamed attitude, asks something to his companion from my side of the counter in the same language, unfamiliar to me. It was clear that this lady was in charge.

“Gracias!” and I’m returning with the piece of paper to my place. I don’t have enough time to connect with Wi-Fi until the highly expected soup was on the table in front of me...steaming. A last huge round of “Gracias!” to this nice lady, I’m amazed how much this place can offer. It's not always easy to face a perfect situation, but when is just pure luck...is pure luck! I have no idea what to do next first, enjoying this hot soup or checking messages from family and friends. Two weeks have passed since I'm offline, so I'm deciding to do both in the same time which is not always a good idea because I was so close in my rush to drop camera's memory card into my steaming soup. Breathing out like I just survived a huge cataclysm, all this because on this memory card is the only video version which I’ve captured on top of Pico de Neblina. Not more than three soup sips and my video started to upload for my friends.

It was a beautiful day yesterday up there and I was very lucky to have half hour window of clear sky, enough for several photos and a short video, and that kind of window is rare up there. Not only is a hard mountain to climb, it’s even harder to get at his foot, a good reason for my maniac friends to wait for these images. By the time I was passing to “segundo” dish I was under a rain of questions regarding this journey. But because hunger is very strong within me, while ending my lunch and with my accumulator charged, all I could write back was: “It’s not the end of this adventure...yet!”
In such a place I would usually spend the night, but was obvious it wasn’t possible and when Nina, name of this welcoming owner, came to cash two US dollars more and to clean the table, I’ve asked for directions. Five minutes later and one journey outside for practical directions I’ve found out I’m two hours and a half away from a village where I might find a place to sleep at an old lady’s house whose name is Kaa, or similar. Well, it’s past-midway already and two and a half hours of descending into the valley on a better trail then until now wasn’t such a bad idea.

I’m starting to pray for that long and hot shower descending further towards the village through a narrow valley and a narrow trail where I’m feeling a bit anxious and also grateful for reaching these places safely. I’m walking now for more than one hour on a trail and I’m taken by surprise by a noise, similar to a human shout, which came into my ears through this thick jungle. I’m stopping to be able to catch this sound better, looking around to spot for another trail which can allow me to search around. Nothing... no other trail, not a noise. Maybe it was just a bird with a funny language, but this noise was human, I’m almost sure. And being aware of that, I’m starting to walk again, descending slower, stepping carefully not to make too much noise so I can hear better if that noise reappears. Nothing... After five minutes I’m deciding to stop again, but all I’m able to hear are sounds from lots of birds, insects and the wind... nothing else! I’m shouting:

”Hola! Alquien aqui?! Hoollaaaaa!”

Forcing my ears to catch any specific sound, just few seconds passed until I can hear it again. At first was surprisingly strong, but afterwards lost its power. I understood immediately that is someone out there, inside this thick jungle, who needs help. This sound is coming from my left side as I’m descending on the trail having on my right side a small creek with a low stream of water. But on my left side there’s no other trail available and for someone to pass through
this deep jungle is almost impossible. I’m shouting again hoping that next reply will give me a better position from where exactly was coming:

“Hoooolaaaaa! Donde estas?”

A rough voice is responding weakly, no intelligible words, but at least it gives me the direction where to look further, so I’m starting to descend faster and in less than a minute I’m spotting a trail on my left side which was entering into the jungle. If there weren't for a few broken branches it would have been impossible to see that’s actually a way to enter. I’m forcing myself with all my power to break through, having my backpack on me, using my machete to cut whatever was in front of me and didn't let me pass through. In the same time I’m shouting I’m on my way to get there as fast as I can. Adrenaline rises quickly in such moments and as much as I’m hurrying, it takes me more than ten minutes to reach in a small clearing, not wider than fifty square-metres with a vertical rock wall in front, not higher than five metres. One indigenous man was laid down at the base of the wall and when he sees me starts repeating the same words:

“Auxilio!Ayudame!”

Dropping my tool and backpack on the ground and getting closer to see better what’s the problem, seconds passed till I understood the whole scene: this guy is a lonely indigenous miner looking for good spots in this place. Next to him are some basic tools to smash rock and hard sand and an empty plastic water bottle next to him proving he's here for quite a while, plus some kind of jungle backpack built from natural fibres and wooden sticks. But what’s really bad is his left forefoot was caught under a huge boulder and blood was dripping out through his shoe. I can definitely estimate that at least his last small toe is completely destroyed only by looking at the amount of blood which is visible on the ground. He is laid down on
his back showing signs he was trying unsuccessfully for some time to push with his other free leg this huge boulder which probably just flipped on one side looking for a better equilibrium and taking him by surprise, leaving him no time to react. My first thought is to give him some water and food seeing his empty water bottle. I’m reaching back to my backpack for my water bottle and while helping him to drink from it I’m asking:

“Que paso aqui, Senor?”

He’s trying to reply something in Spanish language mixed with words from his own tribe language, a clear sign he’s struggling to support the pain. He keeps pushing this boulder which probably weighs tones and asks me to push along. I’m realising is pointless, but I’m going along so he will understand too.

“Es imposible asi, Senor!”

On my knees, next to him, he’s grabbing my right arm and shakes it to get my attention. I’m turning towards him and looking in his flickering wet eyes I understand he’s very scared. His hair is covered with dust, on his face sweat mixed with white dust are enhancing his wrinkles around mouth, eyes and forehead. He's wearing a white t-shirt and black long trousers. Both his hands are having traces of forcing them to find a solid point into the debris underneath us to push this boulder better. I’m grabbing his left hand into my both hands feeling its entire body trembling and shivering, trying to assure him that all will end fine even though I need help to push this monolith. I’m back on my feet shouting around for help. We’re in a valley so my shouts go pretty far, this is how I was able to hear this guy in the first place. No answer though... In my mind are many scenarios, one to leave my backpack here and run into the village to get help, another to go back to the shop, but it’s impossible to me to leave this guy trapped and alone again. I do have some military training, but there’s nothing like a real life situation. I’m returning
next to him to grab from my backpack some bits of cassava bread and my last chocolate bar to give them to him. He takes them saying:

“Si, pero no quiero comer, quiero irme a casa!”

I’m replying to him that I want to go home too, and we’ll go together, but first is better to have some food, because we’re gonna need it. It will not be easy to get him out of here, I do know what I have to do, so I’m looking for a boulder which can provide me with fix hinge-point to apply leverage principle. Only a lever can lift up this boulder enough to drag out this guy's foot, so I’m choosing one which is flat and tall enough. All I need more is a strong and thick beam and recovering my machete from the ground I’m making my way back through the same trail which got me here returning on the main trail to look for a strong tree which might meet my necessities. And definitely here I have more chances to get help if anyone passes. Finally I spot a good tree and I’m starting to hit hard its base with my tool. It takes me a lot of time until I manage to put it to the ground and to cut all its branches in order to have exactly what I need. Unfortunately nobody passed meanwhile, but I do shout one more time, just in case. I'm entering back in the clearing with my new beam on my shoulder and I can see my new friend who's finishing too its last bits of cassava bread. I'm securing the beam under the bolder trying to find the best possible position.

“Yo soy Mihai, Senor! Cual es su nombre?”

His name is Marco and lives in the same village where I'm heading. I'm trying to explain to him what I intend to do in order to lift just a bit the boulder, but my Spanish is not quite intelligible at this moment. Surprisingly, Marco understands immediately thanks to my gestures mostly and if this was easy, I’m just hoping he'll understand what's next, because what will follow it will hurt like hell. Taking out my knife I’m starting to cut his shoe laces from his trapped foot to clear the area of midfoot where I intend to apply a tourniquet which
will stop the bleeding, hopefully. He’s looking at me surprised, but when he sees his entire shoe filled with blood he understands we will lose his shoe. Imagining following steps in my head, I’m starting to look for the things I need: my leather belt I’ll use it for applying tourniquet, my first aid kit will be life saving in this case having sterile bandages, antibiotic cream and enough tape to wrap up his entire foot. I’ll use one of my t-shirts to place it under his heel bone for a more comfortable walk. Easy to imagine, not easy to do it! After making my belt into a loop and preparing a short stick with the length of his planum to use it to twist tourniquet over his foot, I’m repositioning for the last time the hinge closer to the boulder.

“Marco, escuchame, cuando yo levanto la roca, usted sacas el pie, de acuerdo?”

He nodded understanding he has to drag his own foot out and I’m starting to press over the far end of beam. The boulder is heavy but my beam is resisting while I’m putting almost my entire weight and lever works making possible for Marco to take his foot out screaming in pains. I expected his reaction while releasing the beam and placing carefully back the boulder. On Marco’s face I can see both joy for feeling free and distress from the unbearable pain of crushed toes. Now I can try to take out his shoe slowly to avoid creating more pain, sadly he doesn't wear socks and that's making the process harder. Finally I’m throwing the shoe away and I’m starting to twist the stick inside the loop made from my belt over its midfoot and in seconds bleeding is reduced considerably. Tourniquet works! He's entire foot is covered in dirt and blood, so I’m pouring water over it to clean it. I can see its last three toes are affected seriously. After applying clean bandages over which I squeezed previously some antibiotics I’m wrapping up its foot positioning the stick of tourniquet on the entire length of planum. This works also like a splint and I’m deciding to fix it there knowing this procedure is limited at maximum two hours, enough time to reach into his village where Marco is saying there's a
small medical office. After adding on his heel bone a t-shirt I’m helping him to stand up. Marcos is definitely a fighter, he probably spent the entire day in that position in excruciating pains and now he’s standing up, but in this vertical position he feels pain much more intense because the blood pushes harder in extremities. Sun is setting fast over the edge of the valley and daylight is getting lower by the minute. While preparing both our backpacks to start walking down the valley I can see clearly that pain doesn’t allow him to put his foot on the ground. This calls for a new strategy, one which involves leaving my backpack behind and carrying Marco all the way. With all his resistance to this new idea, eventually we agreed that is better to do it like this. It helped a lot that Marco has a short stature with a weight of maximum fifty kilos while I’m a rather big guy, almost two metres in height, just under one hundred kilograms and used to carry weights on my back. I’m hiding our backpacks into some close by bushes after taking my headlamp, water bottle and my blanket. I’ll use my blanket to tie up some sort of harness for Marco, “aguayo” or “quepina” in local dialect, so I can carry him more easily. We’re stopping at the creek on the main trail to quench our thirst and to fill up my water bottle. After cooling ourselves with fresh cold water we’re feeling ourselves more confident for the journey ahead. Every time we meet flat segments of trail Marco asks to walk by himself, even in pains, with just a little help. Even if these moments give me enough time to rest, it’s taking us more than two hours to enter in a village which seems deserted and it got completely dark and cold by the time we’re entering inside a green building on which is painted above the entrance a white cross. Inside, one nurse and one assistant are jumping quickly from their chairs to help us and asking what happened. Everyone is surprised of our presence until Marco starts telling them our story. My main concern is to take out Marco’s tourniquet, the maximum time accepted of two hours have already passed, but nurse assures me that now is in their hands and everything is gonna be ok. Looking at
what this place could offer I’m realizing Marco’s toes need more than this for a proper surgical intervention. I’m waiting for twenty-five minutes now in the corridor when nurse comes out saying:

“Senor, puedes visitar a Marco ahora! El pasara la noche aqui y en la madrugada lo llevaran en avion al mas cercano hospital para la cirugia.”

She just confirmed what I was thinking earlier, he needs a better equipped place for this intervention. Entering back in the room I can see Marco trying to find a more comfy position in his bed while his foot is wrapped up in white clean bandages. He’s under medication and while i’m promising him that tomorrow I’ll go back to recover both our backpacks a bunch of people are stepping in talking very loud. They are his family: wife, kids, parents, grandparents and friends too, all of them with concerns about Marco’s health. I found out from Marco on our way here that he’s twenty-six years old, he’s wife Maria is seventeen and has two amazing kids, Oscar a two years old boy and Aramí, almost six months old daughter. Yes, around here tradition allows to form a couple in early age of youth, at fourteen years old most of the indigenous girls already have their first child. My eyes are been repeatedly attracted by the smile of Marco's six months old daughter.

“Qual es su nombre otra ves?” pointing to that tiny human being.

Maria, Marco's wife, answers proudly:

“Aramí! Aramí! In lingua Guarani significa mi cielo o pedaso de cielo!”

It is clear why they chose a name related with the sky, her deep blue shiny eyes, a rare colour among them, are hypnotic on her brown little face. Meanwhile someone left and returned with food for both of us, Marco and I, a long expected dinner. After everybody
understood the situation, their attention turned towards me and my only reaction is to ask for directions to reach old lady Kaa’s house, or similar, for accommodation, but apparently they’re all agreeing it would be better for me to sleep at their home. We’re both feeling extremely exhausted, a good reason for deciding it’s time to get some rest, at least for us, “brothers in adventure”, name given by the entire group. I’m saying goodbye to him, knowing that in the next day we’re not gonna see each other anymore. He's in better hands now.

Marco’s family is living in a very simple house, like the majority of houses around here, entering through a small gate from the main street I’m standing inside of an inner courtyard from where I’m able to see doors to a number of rooms. Their walls are built from clay bricks and strengthened with wooden beams and pillars while inside everything is basic: one bed, one table with two chairs and one nightstand. My room has light but no socket, no bathroom, no shower. Asking for toilet, I’m guided through a narrow space left between two rooms in the backyard where a wooden box is used as toilet. I can’t describe the smell. Not even water seems to be plentiful despite the fact we’re inside the jungle and in a green valley, the only source of water is a big blue plastic reservoir, cup shape, which could contained up to three thousands litters. Instead of a lid a huge blanket acts as a filter for rain water which is driven through pipes from the surrounding rooftops into the reservoir, a clear sign that the pipe which feeds usually this reservoir wasn’t enough. Tired like a mule after an entire day of work, I still find some strength to wash some parts of my body so I can have a more pleasantly sleep. Midnight caught me laid down on bed with my eyes still open looking at room's ceiling and thinking at this crazy day. My thoughts are flying now towards my backpack just realising that all my documents are inside it. Usually I’m very careful keeping it always close by, but with everything what happened I forgotten completely.
On one hand I’m quite stressed knowing that losing my papers would be a painful experience inside a country in which I’ve entered illegally, on the other hand I’m quite sure that in these remote places is hard to “lose” them. Documents are important, but so are all the stuff which I carry inside, my backpack with its entire cargo are the only personal things which can provide me with a decent way of living in a survival situation. Closing my eyes somewhat satisfied, I realise no “thank you” was pronounced today and this reminds me the fact that in all five Pemon languages there’s no equivalent for words like “please” and “thank you” and I’m starting to enjoy this straightforward attitude. Anyway, I’m falling asleep saying to myself: “Marco, thank you for our experience!”

I’m waking up late next day with an urge of using that smelly wooden box called toilet. A quick tour in the backyard and I’m called by someone from the kitchen for “desayuno” or breakfast. While eating they announce me that Marco flew early in the morning in a nearby city. Yesterday, being so exhausted, I didn’t realised when the nurse told me they will fly Marco to the nearest hospital. So, this village has an airport or at least a track and that’s exceptional good news! Didn’t had time to pop the question about a possible next flight when in the kitchen enters a man, around fifty years old who, in a worse English language than mine, presents himself as being Pedro. I’m excusing myself after finishing eating for heading back in the clearing to recover our backpacks, but Pedro already knows about my backpack and where is it, Marco probably told him the details. As I understand, he sent one hour ago two guys to recover both our backpacks, assuring me that all my things will be recovered, that I shouldn’t be concerned and if just one small thing is missing from my baggage all I have to do is to point out to him and in maximum one hour I’ll have it back and the person responsible for this will be left without a finger. I admit that in my previous journey in Venezuela I’ve heard stories about this cruel treatment applied to thieves, but this was a
surprise. And he is definitely Casique! Today it's hard to accept this “tradition” which probably arose as a necessity hundreds of years ago in these remote communities where the short arm of justice probably never reached. Cutting limbs or even capital punishment for inducing fear among the subjects were practices used on the territories of my country too, Romania, more than five hundred years ago, during the rule of Vlad the Impaler. Everyone knows him better under the name of Dracula, a character created by the Irish writer Bram Stocker. This particular story has it that during his rule a cup made entirely from gold was used to drink water from a public spring. Everybody who was passing on the road and stopped to drink water was using this cup and even if temptation was present nobody had the audacity to steal it. Until the day of his death...

Moreover, Pedro advices me to look for him at the airport later on. Well, I have to say this meeting exceeded all my expectations: I’ll have my backpack returned in less than one hour without any effort, plus a grateful Casique inside of an airport, all showing lots of chances to fly out today. I’m totally sure his visit wasn’t a coincidence, it was a way of giving “thanks” for helping Marco. Forty-five minutes later two guys are entering inside the courtyard, one carrying Marco’s things, the other my backpack. Insanely happy and grateful I’m shaking everybody’s hands, my documents are here and that’s making me more relaxed.

Having clean clothes now I’m heading towards the airport where just a stripe of land at the end of the village acts as a landing track and a wooden house as an office. No passport control, no military presence, just Pedro accompanied by his friends. While I'm waiting for a possible airplane I'm asking Pedro if I can find in this village some “ancient Pemon technology” for catching fish. He’s explaining me that this method is far more older and after he sends word in the village a small kid with round black eyes, on his name Carlos, suddenly appears and hands me a good amount of this precious
mixture. It took another day until a small and old commercial Cessna airplane is flying me in the next city which lies on Orinoco's right bank and from where, according to Pedro, chances to catch a similar airplane to Bolivar county are far greater. Looking over the jungle is always breathless, this country is amazingly beautiful and this makes the flight more bearable despite my sensibility of using this particular type of airplane. We're landing on a much better airplane track, unfortunately not in the same place where Marco flew a day before, I would have loved to pay a visit to my little friend. I really hope he's well.

Getting down of the airplane I’m advised to have a talk with the officer in charge with this airport to find information about how can I get to my destination. He doesn’t ask for my papers, which is great, but tells me that if tomorrow morning at 09 a.m. a military airplane doesn’t receive the order to fly, it might pass days until another available. That's great news, I have a possible free ride with a military airplane and a concern too that they might ask for my visa stamp before departure. We’ll see...

Behind the airport, few streets ahead, a small hostel which rents private rooms is the only one recommended. I'm heading there feeling optimistic for that long expected hot shower. That's my first question addressed to the receptionist and receiving confirmation I'm paying gladly five bucks for one night. I cannot describe the sensation of feeling hot water on my body after more than two weeks, equally cannot express how much I relaxed afterwards, all I know is that I fell asleep immediately in a very deep one. I'm waking up in exactly the same position in which I fell asleep several hours ago, it's evening already and sun starts to settle down. Here temperatures are higher and looking down from my balcony I can spot a small square, like a viewpoint, from where sunset seems much more attractive with its yellow reddish reflections over Orinoco’s muddy waters. In light clothes I’m crossing the square in heist to
catch the last rays of light over the village. An interesting mix of noises from both village and the jungle are invading the square. This entire late concert of nature is interrupted by a soft voice saying:

“Good evening, are you American?”

Turning to see who's asking who, I'm seeing standing in front of a small bar with two tables in front, a gorgeous woman silhouette smiling. I'm turning again to see if there's another person to whom she's addressing the question, moment when she’s saying again:

“I'm talking with you, tall man!” and she's smiling again.

“Or are you Canadian? European?!?”

I'm walking towards her.

“Good evening, I’m Mihai, European!” and we’re both laughing.

“Who do you think I was addressing to?! Isn't obvious you're the only foreigner around here?”

“Yes, it may be true, but I was sure only when you called me – tall man!”.

Another round of laughs and I'm continuing:

“I'm very glad to meet someone who speaks English, my Spanish is really bad!”

“I'm glad too, Mihai, and I'm Vanessa! What brings you to our village? Are you lost?”

I'm smiling saying:

“Well...it's a long story, maybe would be better to have a seat first?”

“Of course, did you have dinner?”

“No!” I'm replying. “I'm starving actually! I’ve skipped lunch with a long sleep!”
We both decide we should have our dinner here, she knows the owner and assures me here’s the best food in the village.

“I just arrived in the morning from Mavaca valley” I'm continuing, but she's interrupting:

“So you are the “Gringo" who helped a local from the borders by carrying him to hospital? I thought you might be, everybody around here found out about it!”

I was a bit shocked to see how news around here are travelling that fast:

“And that's how a long story gets shrieked in an instant!” and we’re both laughing out loud.

“How come you speak English so well? You're from here, right?”

“Yes!” she replies.

Apparently she studied in England in her youth, afterwards worked around Europe for several years and now she's back home for a while to take care and help with family business.

“From where are you exactly?”

“When I’m travelling around South America I’m responding seldom to this question that I'm from Russia, with the exception of Venezuela.”

“Why this exception?”

“It's because you Venezuelans don't like much Russians. I remember this from my last travel several years ago, it's still like this?”

“No, not really! I don't remember this trend, here as you may have noticed, we're far away from big cities. So, are you Russian?”
“I'm not, I’m Romanian! I'm just lying from time to time about it because around here few people even heard about my beautiful country and doing so I'm avoiding awkward situations and lots of explanations. You might know about it, you spent some time around Europe. Have you been there?”

“As a matter of fact I was!” she says very surprised. “I’ve been in your country about five years ago visiting Sibiu city in Transylvania. I'll never forget it, it was love at first sight, an amazing city with fabulous surroundings, isn't it?”

Now I'm the surprised one:

“Yes, it's true, Sibiu is one of our Transylvanian gems. I've lived there a few years. Thank you!”

“There's no need for thanks! How do you feel about Venezuela?”

“It's definitely a crazy country. Such a beautiful country is rare and unique. A lot of time is needed to discover just a small part of it.”

She agrees by nodding and asks:

“Why crazy?!?”

“Recent history of Venezuela says it all, isn't it?”

“So you know our history too?”

“Not as much as I would like.”

At this point we decide that a bottle of white wine would wash better our throats during dinner.

“In my last visit here I could witness and feel hunger. Were you around here in those years of famine?”

“Yes, briefly, but I returned back home six months ago. I do remember hunger brings out what’s worse in people!”
“I cannot disagree with this, but it also brings people together and the best example is the changed attitude between the very people of your country, don’t you think?”

“About what attitude you’re talking more exactly?”

“I clearly remember a discussion which I’ve had back then with a bus driver who was saying that before those times of famine relations between Venezuelans were bad, but: Foreigners were treated better, now we’re more united instead we treat foreigners worse!”

She looks at me a bit annoyed and I’m continuing:

“Are his words, what can I say more?!?” and both of us started laughing.

“I have to admit though that in my previous visit here I’ve met extraordinary people. Maybe I was just lucky!?”

She looks directly into my eyes:

“I’ll not bet on that!”

We continued for more than two hours talking and it was clear we both are fond of each other.

“You're travelling alone?”

“Yes.”

“Are you single?”

“Yes.”

“Let's continue this night in your bed!”

I have to be honest with myself and recognise that after two weeks in wilderness to receive the warmth of a woman is an unexpected gift from gods, especially coming from a smart and beautiful one.
A strong ray of light is playing over my eyelids and I’m opening them slowly. Sun light is entering inside the room through balcony’s open door. Vanessa still sleeps and this light is caressing her dark shiny hair amplifying its perfect brownish face tone making her much more beautiful on daylight. Checking the time I’m just remembering I have less than half an hour until 09:00 a.m. when a free ride with a military airplane might happen and I cannot miss it. I’m jumping in the bathroom for a quick shower and 10 minutes later I’m all dressed up and ready to run towards the airport. She’s still sleeping and I’m deciding to not wake her up, with a long kiss on her shoulder I’m saying goodbye.

I’m reaching at the airport just in time for boarding. Well...boarding is just to write a name in their travel papers, that’s the reason for which nobody bothered to look for my entering visa stamp. Few minutes after nine o’clock I’m in the air with destination Santa Elena de Uairen, Bolivar County, looking over the village through a small round window as the military airplane takes altitude. I’m almost sure I can see Vanessa in the balcony wavering to me. I’m waving back...

I’m having more than one hour flying outside Amazon County inside Bolivar County, enough time to fill it with lots of thoughts. One is about last night when I replied to Vanessa’s question if I’m single that I am. But there’s someone who is in my head and most likely in my heart too...
“Esperta”

Her head is lean slightly forward to catch better whatever she's watching on her phone screen through sunglasses as walking on sidewalk. A very natural walk I might add, considering her high heels which she's wearing for her over average height. A skirt over her small and pointy knees and a fluffy t-shirt over which a jacket with lifted shoulders makes her walk even more determined. Long curly brown hair with blond ribbons dances against the delicate wind of a sunny day revealing her face just for short moments. She's wildly beautiful, the right type of wild beauty, the kind of woman who might lead jaguars through the jungle with her graceful and unique moves. I'm wondering if she's aware of her natural way of being and how much admiration she creates around. If it wouldn't have been too awkward I would have walked backwardly to preserve distance between us, instead I can stop and wait for her to get closer. This move gives me more time to watch her and, before she's passing next to me, something from her phone makes her lift her head with a large smile. That's absolutely the most beautiful smile which I’ve ever seen in my life! I'm taking off my sunglasses looking directly at her, most likely with a stupid smile on my face, understanding I'm definitely under her spell. She’s probably noticing my still posture looking at me as she walks by. My body automatically turns towards her like a sunflower turns with the sun, hoping for her to react, to stop or just a quick look back; I’m gathering all my strengths to not look like a fool. She's walking a few steps further and stops without turning. My heart starts to beat faster. Please turn?! And she does! Half way, enough to send me a look over her sunglasses with her smile still on her face. Following the principle “blink if you like me", we both start walking towards each other.

“Oh, I really want to know your name! Mine is Mihai!”
She looks at me like she doesn't understand, but my right hand is already looking for at least a delicate handshake. Having finally her hand into mine I hear her saying:

“Eu soy Kitara! Nao falo bem Ingles!”

Here, in Brazil, I’ve learned a bit of Portuguese few years ago. Once I got to understand their songs lyrics I’ve reached at that level where I can ask for directions and make friends too, so our conversation continues in Portuguese.

“It doesn't matter, we can talk in your language!” I'm saying.

“You speak Portuguese, I’m surprised!”

“Just enough to ask for your name!”

Next round of laughs brought back her amazing smile which made me speechless moments before. Two ice creams seems a good idea for both of us to continue our conversation. She poses a beautiful gap between her two front upper teeth which is enhanced every time she's making a very particular gesture of caching her tongue’s tip between her teeth along with a wide smile.

“May I ask what origins have the artists who created this marvellous creature?”

Clearly I’m not thinking straight...

“Really?! That's your best?! If you're asking about my parents, my mother has African origins, she's from Salvador, and my father is a pure Brazilian from here, Rio de Janeiro!”

Discussions went on... better, with both of us acting like sponges to find out more about each other. I wasn't prepared to let her go.

“Excuse me, more than two hours have passed and I remember I've stopped you in the middle of the street. Where were you going?”
My question triggers an alert reaction as like she just remembered something very important and she says, putting her palm hand on her forehead:

“I forgot completely! I missed my piano lesson. You made me forget it!” looking at me with a guilty face and continues:

“And I recollect differently about who stopped who!”

“Tell me, please, from where were you coming?”

“From my office in Niteroi. And I was in a hurry too, traffic is a killer at these hours.”

“And your job is?! If is not too much to ask?!”

“I'm working as clothes fashion designer for kids!”

“Why am I not surprised?! Creative too!”

“I'm crazy about kids... none so far...maybe one day!

A short pause and she continues:

“We need to make a plan for today, we can figure it out at lunch. You're my guest, welcome in Brazil!”

“You definitely know how to read minds, mine for sure! Thank you!”

Didn't quite decide much during lunch, only to take a walk in a nearby park. She's a free spirit, good mood surrounds her completely and her ability to observe beauty even in the most insignificant things conquered me.

“I'm not ready to let you go yet!” I’m saying out loud without realising.

She just looks at me not saying one word. I was glad and relieved for that to happen. Finally she says:
“We can meet a friend of mine at a nearby pub. You gonna love her! She too loves travelling too and speaks English well. You two can exchange lots of information, especially about Brazil.”

“I'm in! Let's go!”

Couple of blocks away, in a pub with specific Brazilian music, samba, we meet the owner Camilla, a woman with a high sense of humour. She's asking me about what places I intend to visit in Brazil, apparently she travelled all around the country.

“I want to climb Pico da Neblina and afterwards to pass in Venezuela.”

“Pico da Neblina?! That's a place which I'm hunting for years now! Will you be part of an expedition?”

“No, I'll try to do it by myself. But I’m not saying no to good companions.”

“You're just a crazy guy, aren't you?”

“I'm trying to keep it within limits.”

We're all laughing.

“When do you start? And what's the itinerary?” asks Camilla.

“I have a flight in a month from now to Manaus. From there up river on Rio Negro as close as possible. I have no idea how it will go, I just know I want to get there somehow.”

“I hope I'll see you again, my new dear!” implying that risks of this type of journey are extremely high.

“You know Camilla, there's a German saying which has it that one meets twice in life! Let's hope for more than this!”

“Cheers to that!” Kitara intervenes and we all drink our glasses to the bottom.
One hour later, saying goodbye to Camilla, Kitara and I are heading to the exit door. Outside she’s asking:

“Only one month more around here? We need plans for it, isn't it?”

“Yes, it's the reason for which I'm still not yet ready to let you go tonight!”

I'm grabbing her by the shoulders and I'm kissing her softly on her lips. She's embracing me...and my kiss too. If it wasn't for Camilla, who stepped out seconds later, we would have continued this amazing moment. Which we did as soon as we said once more goodbye to Camilla, but only after we exchanged social profiles at Kitara's insistence. Social life in Brazil, like in all South America, is characterised, among others, by a high level of violence against women, a strong reason for which in the last few years feminism movement grew a lot. Her insistence for exchanging social profiles with Camilla was probably a way of securing herself against a potential serial killer...that would be me!

“I’m inviting you to my home. But I have one condition!” she says.

“I’m honoured, name it!”

“Please don’t strangle me?!?”

“That’s the condition!? I’m reacting trying not to laugh, knowing from TV it was a huge deal about a similar recent case of homicide.

“Consider it done, I want you for more than one night!”

Her kiss came instantly.

“The only one who can protect me from you is my cat, Tao! He’s my prince, you know?”

“Let’s meet him, then!”
Her apartment is in Niteroi and to get there we’re using city's ferry service over Guanabara Bay. Close to beach, almost empty, just the basic stuff for living, instead living room is filled with musical instruments. Guitar is her favoured instrument and she doesn’t miss the chance to play a song, revealing one of her numerous talents. An interesting coincidence I might say, guitar in Romanian language is spelled “chitara” very similar with her special name. I fell in love instantly with her style of playing and her cat Tao. This playful white cat with grey ears is welcoming me in the best possible way, by jumping in my lap as soon I sit down on the floor looking for a comfortable place to seat. She plays with so much passion, connected to this Brazilian folk song which talks about why life should be lived at its fullness. By the end of the song Tao is purring in my lap receiving my caresses with its eyes closed.

We spent a whole month together having crazy experiences. We decided after a few days to spend an entire week in a small village called Caraiva. A heavenly place with a bohemian vibe where a river with eponymous name empties it in Atlantic ocean, south of Porto Seguro. No cars around, access into the village is done by boats over the river, streets covered in soft thick white sand which makes us walk slowly, a variety of pubs with all types of music and food, friendly people all around, parties every night. Despite all that the place itself was very quiet, a kind of place where energies are so harmonious combined that even the relation between people and street dogs is remarkable. We had great moments there, it’s impossible otherwise in such a place where everything is possible and allowed as long as nobody is disturbed. Her guitar made this experience even more pleasantly. Here, she confessed to me about her nine years of childless marriage which ended less than a year ago, time in which she hopped for a child. More in this regard, at our return to Rio, she will have a medical intervention which, according to her, is not a difficult one. I don’t need to know more, only that
she’ll allow me to be next to her, request which brought out a smile hugging me with force and hiding her face on my chest saying:

“I feel deep inside the desire to have a child...”

I've always looked at this as to a natural maternal instinct, something not quite different but far more powerful than ours, men's.

“How come a man like you, in your forty's, is with no wife and no children? What have you done all this time, Sir?!”

“You do sound a lot like my mother! You two would get along perfectly!”

There's no answer which can give satisfaction to such a question, life is an expectation of an unexpected course of events and it's just life...and one! I'm continuing after some moments:

“I know for sure that if so, I wouldn't have been here.”

“You enjoy a lot travelling and twisting girls’ minds, aren't you?

“I do enjoy travelling, yes! Wasn't I the one close to twist my neck because of you, beautiful?!”

“You're thinking about getting married at one point, forming a family with kids and all, isn't it?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If I would ask you to father my child without any future responsibility, would your answer be no?”

“Yes!”

I answered in a blink of an eye, knowing I'll never be able to live far away from my own kid.

“You're easy to read, you know?”

“I think we’ve agreed on that since the first day we've met, remember?”
“Yes, Beast!”

“Never forget that!”

“Never…”

It took one week for her to recover completely after the surgery and more than three weeks have passed since I’ve met her. She was cooking like she was walking, wild! And from this wilderness often great flavours came out. It was her from whom I've learned all those tropical fruits and vegetables with hard names to pronounce, but with incredible flavours. During her recovery time I tried to take on this responsibility, unfortunately, turned out, comparing with her wild style, I’m very domesticated. And probably for this reason I got stuck with the name of “Beast” while she proclaimed herself “Esperta”.

Time passed fast and both of us realised this last week until my flight to Manaus should be unforgettable. We started going out every day, short trips in and around Rio, giving me the opportunity to meet her family and friends. These moments allowed me to get in contact with this different world, her world. At this point I’m thinking, as I did first time when I got in contact with these places and despite my growing feelings for her, that both South and Central America are fabulous for travelling but where I'll never live the rest of my life. I cannot explain myself exactly why I ended up with those thoughts, is probably just a feeling based on instinct. Somehow I’m thinking she knows, she's looking at me often and often like a hopeless girl on a train station platform exchanging last looks with her soldier lover who’s going to fight in a war. As days passed getting closer and closer to the day of my departure, moments of long quiet hugs were more and more present. In such a moment, before boarding at the airport, I’m saying to her:

“’I truly like you, girl!”
“I know, that’s why is so hard for me to let you go now. Please don’t forget me, I won’t! You are very important to me...”

She’s reaching in one of her pockets from where takes out a neck chain, military type, on which a functional small harmonica is hanged. Not bigger than half a cigarette lighter, I’m able to play some notes.

“I want you to have it, to help you in your travels!”

“Thank you for everything, Kitara!”
“Second adventure”

I’m squeezing in my fist Kitara’s harmonica while looking over Gran Sabana of Bolivar county through the same small and round military airplane window. From up here is easy to spot the borders of National Park Canaima, which is mostly represented by rivers, outside the protected area are large traces of old and current diggings for gold. In the distance are visible the first tepuys, these famous flat topped mountains with vertical rocky walls which made me named Bolivar county “land of high fortresses”. Valleys and canyons are cutting these lands with hard navigable rivers on whose courses are hundreds of falls, caves and exceptional places, most of them well hidden, for which the only word which can describe their beauty is “paradise”.

The guys with whom I’m travelling with, after finding out I too have some military background and knowing my destination, have convinced the pilots to make a stop on Canaima’s airport. I couldn’t believe my ears; this place certainly fits all requirements to be called “paradise”. Right here I’ve met and lived among Pemons for two weeks an unforgettable experience and it’s also the place from where it started my previous sixty kilometres adventure upriver with a motorized canoe to Angel Falls which stands just opposite my destination. This exciting news made me incredible happy, I’ll have the chance to revisit my old friends now and also to remember a very intense episode which happened to me here and I’m deciding this is a good moment to share a memory with the guys:

“More than six days have passed since I arrived in Canaima using a commercial airplane from La Paraqua which carried merchandise. In all this time my efforts of finding a solution to reach Angel Falls where always cancelled by the completely lack of foreigner tourists due to all international advices which drove them
to other countries. At that point the only possible scenario was to pay in full the whole expedition by myself, and this was out of the question. I couldn't afford the first price for the entire tour which I’ve been offered in my first day inside the country. Three days after entering the country, during which former president Maduro was reconfirmed in his position, prices went up fast. On the other hand, one of the comparison which was eloquent and I use it in my first video made in Ciudad Bolivar city, showed the level of chaos: It's impossible to understand how come two litres of water which values 1 US dollar are equivalent, not to fifteen, not to one hundred and fifty, but to one thousand five hundreds litres of gasoline. And not easy to buy outside big cities, harder still here in Canaima to where the only way to travel is on water or by air. And gasoline was needed for fuelling the heavy, powerful Yamaha motors which were pushing long wooden canoes upriver.

On this sixth day, in the afternoon, I was as usual heading for the large round lagoon formed by Carrao River just below one of its waterfalls, Frog. That's the place over which all airplanes heading for tours above Angel Falls are flying, where everyone is swimming, bathing, washes laundry, fishing and enjoys sun having an exquisite white sand beach surrounded by forests from which tall coconuts tree are displaying their large branches over. Three of them arose from lagoon waters, and this image was also the one used to advertise this paradise. Passing next to them on the shore I decided to stop much further where the waters of Frog Falls were feeding a small power plant which was producing free electricity for everyone around. I chose this spot also for a better view around the lagoon where lots of children and adults were enjoying the day. I have a tremendous respect for indigenous, after all their ancestors were the first inhabitants of these lands long before Christopher Columbus had the chance to know them. Dropping my clothes on the beach sand I jumped in Carrao river’s black waters. Its colour is given by the
minerals which are flowing into river from thousands of square-kilometres of green jungle. When back on hot sand the sun was already above the tips of the tree behind me warming everything it touched and I was not realising that above us a big black cloud was preparing to release its big water drops. My thoughts were still wrapped around this critical situation from which I couldn't see any way out and this made me feel emotionally helpless. Suddenly rain started and big water drops fell on my body cooling it slowly. Behind me the sun was still strong and, as I was standing on my feet looking over the lagoon, the most beautiful natural phenomenon happened: a rainbow. It was the clearest rainbow ever seen, its bright colours started from the black waters of the lagoon and ended in the beach white sand while its position framing the falls gave the illusion of a live painting. I felt like it was a privilege to witness such a marvel making me lifting my head towards the sky, spreading my arms to receive this heavenly benediction. In exactly that moment an immense tension break through and tears from my eyes started to flow constantly for a while. I couldn’t remember when I cried last time, but this episode somehow wiped out completely my helpless emotions. It was a special and powerful personal moment which I’ll never forget. It wasn't anymore about how to reach Angel Falls. I’m not sure if the locals saw me then, but hours after it happened I received the invitation to live with the community and next day news that two tourists, a couple from the capital Caracas will arrive, made possible my journey two weeks later to Angel Falls. It was one of my best life experiences and these special moments can't be caught on camera.”

Meanwhile, ten minutes before landing, one of the pilots announces that on the ground is another airplane which will wait for me to fly to Kavak, another paradise, a place closer to my destination and from where I know I can continue on foot over one of the largest tepuys in the area, Auyan – meaning “Devil's House" in all five Pemon
languages. This news isn’t quite what I hopped for, I have to postpone reunion with my old friends Pemon for my way back. I can't refuse this gift and anyway I never liked to travel through the same itineraries, unquestionably why, nor to make turn back on the same trails, plus now I have the opportunity to choose a journey on land rather than the same journey on water from Canaima. With a bit of heavy heart I’m confirming by thanking them for all their efforts and hospitality. Changing airplanes happens fast and in no time I’m in the air again trying to have a look over the forest which separates the airport from the lagoon. Nothing changed, maybe some new lodges here and there. Forty minutes later we’re landing on a track not much better than the one managed by Pedro in Marco's village. Kavak is a village laid at mountain foot with astonishing scenery. Clouds are embracing like a moving belt the mountain’s vertical rocky walls in plain sun. I’m excited thinking I’ll have the chance to visit this place before starting a long seven days walk through the deep jungle and over this incredible mountain where I'm sure I’ll see more amazing places. It's gonna be a brand new adventure! Until then I’m planning for tomorrow first thing in the morning will be to pay a visit to the best landmark of this paradise. Best time to get there is at midday when sun passes over a narrow canyon throwing its beams of light through the trees branches above which are giving the impression of barely hanging on the edge. A crystal clear water flows through this two, three meters wide canyon and only the high walls are a certain proof of its tremendous power. Few ropes which help the passing through deep waters and over high boulders are the only things which show human presence. After a while the canyon opens just enough to make room, just in front, for a beautiful waterfall. Here, sun and water are creating a marvellous show, just above the pool at the waterfall’s base, together with moving shadows thrown over the entire place. After a relaxing swimming in this exquisite natural pool, a few moments of meditation up on a high boulder is the best way of
absorbing surrounding sounds. Every sound inside this almost completely enclosed place is amplified a hundred times although is quiet and peaceful, an extraordinary place to relax and to be grateful for. Kitara's smiling face comes in my mind and made me smile too with my eyes closed hoping to preserve its image intact. I’m deciding to give her a call just as soon as I’ll have access to internet.

I’ve spent the rest of the day preparing for the trip ahead buying provisions and asking directions and advices. Next day early in the morning I'm heading for the trail with the hope of shorting the time with at least one day. I had the chance to see many magnificent waterfalls along Churun river and to climb the highest point of Auyan tepuy at an altitude of 2,500 metres. And it happened, on the sixth day I'm stepping inside Raton base camp, just in front of Angel Falls, on the right bank of Churun River. One single construction with no walls at a few meters from the river bank, just a large tall roof under which I can stay dry and two bathrooms, unfortunately locked at the moment till guides will show up. Here, several years ago I’ve eaten the best Venezuelan chicken cooked by some very skilful Pemon guides. Unfortunately, today's menu is much, much poorer. My only thoughts are just to hang up my hammock and lay in it for a long sleep in this place free of mosquitoes. There's nobody here today and the last moment of day light offers me a clear view over Angel Falls directly from inside my hammock. I hope for a group of tourists tomorrow which might have a free place in their canoes, otherwise food will be over by tomorrow night. I'm falling asleep watching a bunch of fire flies marking their way along the river bank spreading their light over the grass. My last thought is I can't remember from whom and where I learned that their presence indicate a very clean ecosystem.

Morning cold wakes me up making me pull off the blanket from my face revealing first rays of daylight and a thick fog in the valley blocking the view over Angel Falls. I'm preparing a small backpack
only with few necessary things for the last segment to my destination hiding my large backpack inside the jungle, taking this time my documents with me. Just before I'm exiting the camp the highest waterfall in the world reveals itself through the fog. All its eight hundreds and seven meters of free fall are remarkable. But what's more astonishing is that from the place I'm standing this waterfall displays itself like ignoring laws of physics, the edge of its vertical wall over which flows it's the highest one giving the impression of something or someone behind the edge has the power of collecting all waters from there in this highest point. I'm turning my back to it and start walking towards La Catira Falls, unfortunately after less than one hundred metres trail disappears and I really hopped for a good one. Good thing I have just a small baggage and although trees are not that close to each other, getting through this jungle is not easy, ground is wet after a long night rain and my arms are hurting after the last days. Took me more time than anticipated to reach waterfall’s base, a place from where its shape is no longer like a bride's veil, it's much more majestic. Its volume of water gives it a power in face of which I can only feel humble and astonished. I'm thinking of trying to reach higher to observe better its upper cascades and taluses. I'm looking at both vertical rock walls framing the waterfall trying to find a way up, but it's clear that only with special climbing gear I’ll be able to make it. With a bit of effort I'm able to reach through the forest high enough to spot a bit of its higher beauty and from here I can spot easily Angel Falls too, as I did years ago from there discovering this beauty. That interesting visual effect from the base camp disappears; from up here the view is over the edge of Angel Falls walls, revealing higher lands covered by jungle’s trees and with rock formations looking like guardians of this old forbidden place. Old beliefs regarding a total ban of entering on Auyan Tepuy, from here its name Devil's House in Pemon languages, are still kept alive by some tribes around the Amazon and especially Guyana Highlands. This entire area is truly a place of wonder, where
nature expresses itself at its highest levels. La Catira's waters flow from above the right vertical wall of Devil's Canyon through a narrow crack inside the wall, continue for a while through the forest and from here into Churun river. A pair of toucans is flying by undisturbed by my presence giving me the opportunity to capture them on camera while filming my video. By nightfall I’m back at the base camp and, unfortunately, no one arrived yet. Second night passed fast and still nobody during the entire next day. I’ve reached the base of Angel Falls too on the third day, not only to kill time, this waterfall in wet season it’s beyond the realm of reason. It's that kind of place which must be visited in both dry and wet seasons because both are having their unique charm. The trip up there and enjoying its pool by myself gave me a strong feeling of hunger. Third night is the coldest so far, it rained almost continuously since my return from the waterfall and I’m not able to sleep, thinking that probably the decision to wait here for a boat from downstream was too optimistic. If I would have went back to Kavak two days ago, in these weather conditions, probably I wouldn’t have reached one quarter of the distance and most probably with no food available. From Raton base camp are only two ways, downstream to Canaima on a boat or back on the same road to Kavak. When I’m starting to question my decisions is usually because I’m hungry, really hungry. My provisions are long gone and in the last two days I managed to catch only few small fishes, mostly by using ”ancient Pemon technology”. Inside the jungle I couldn’t find much, three wild pineapple, from which one was inedible, plus one young edible palm. For breakfast I’ll have the last pineapple, maybe a last piece of palm heart if still edible and at least one potato from the four I’ve found hanged up in a plastic bag in one of camp building’s corners. Whoever left it here did it for such cases, I’ll definitely have him in my prayers. It's my second visit in Venezuela and seems that the curse of famine is following me still. Morning brings finally a clear sky and a bright sun making possible for airplanes to bring tourist for sky tours over Angels Falls. It’s a
good sign, not enough though, canoes are possible to start running only tomorrow or even later on giving the raising water level. It is a very long, long day, the expectancy is so high and I’m feeling stressed every time I’m hearing an airplane from the distance which every time sounds to me like a boat motor. I’m checking time, it’s passed 15.00 hours and by this time if a boat would have leaved from Canaima, by now should have been arrived. I’m preparing mentally for one more night under the protective roof of camp’s single building. As I’m swinging in my hammock I start to fall asleep slowly when a different and clear noise of a boat motor on water made me jump on my feet. Two canoes are approaching fast, one is stopping on the other side of the river, probably they will continue for another hour on foot through the jungle to reach Angel Falls before nightfall, the second one comes directly to the camp. Both canoes are carrying tourists, mostly Asian origin. They are my saviours! And it's always fun when they are around! And I got to taste again the Venezuelan chicken later on the evening! Next day, after the guys from the second boat had their share of Angel Falls, we’re on our way towards Canaima on Churun River, swinging canoes among huge boulders with funny shapes. Water level is high after so many days of rain and rapids are strong on this river losing their power only on the much wider Carrao river, on which we’re stopping four hours later above Frog falls, next to Canaima’s lagoon. Heavy rain is falling again just as we’re jumping on the bank from where two minibuses take us at a lodge near the same village where I’m hoping to have a reunion with my old friends. This heavy rain doesn’t stop me to get at the house where I was received like one of their own years ago. Same feeling for me and surprise for them when they’re aware of my presence.

“Look who’s here!?" says Arnaldo jumping from his hammock.

“Where’s your backpack, Miguel? We are all waiting for you for more than an hour. One of the guides with whom you came from Raton camp is my friend and he told us about you. When you
mentioned my name to them and expressed your desire to visit us, he knew who you are.”

“Really?! I can’t believe you even remember me, guys! Thank you! And you improved your English a lot, aren’t you?

“Do you remember the book which you offered me? I've read it twice! Now I know more about Europe's history too!”

I remember now that when we said goodbye the only gifts I could offer him were one small flute from the Balkans and a book, a small token of my appreciation.

“Wow, that’s great! I’ll check my bag to look for a new one!”

Arnaldo was the guy who took care of me in my first days here. He’s also a boat man, guide and owns he's own canoes, the same guy with whom I’ve captured a video enjoying together a coconut picked from his own yard.

“Come and meet the new members of our family, Miguel!”

When we introduced ourselves for the first time he decided to call me Miguel, Spanish version of my name, letter “h” being a bit hard for them to pronounce.

Four more small kids inside this house since my last visit and a second wife for Arnaldo. Two are his own and two are his younger brother, Felix. Arnaldo has three older kids and Felix one. With eight kids in a house is not easy to survive. Around here there's a tradition which has it that if a man marries a woman who has younger unmarried sisters, he's entitled to consider all of them as wives if there's mutual agreement.

“What better sign of a thriving life, here, in Canaima!? Congratulation to all, I’m very happy to be here with all of you!”

“You travel now without baggage? Your room is prepared to stay with us for a while again. Ok?”
“Thank you all, guys, but I’ve made already arrangements at the lodge. As much as I wish, this time I cannot stay, tomorrow morning I’m flying with the same group, with whom I’ve travelled today, to Ciudad Bolivar if weather allows. And from there another destination, as you know.”

“But you never travel with plans, I remember that about you! I’m sure you can stay just a few days and let’s hope for a better weather!”

“Yes, weather doesn’t help much. Next time, Arnaldo, next time, it’s a promise! This paradise of yours will always drag me to it, also because you all are part of it!”

We discussed until late in the night about how things changed since then, having now, as a community, more control over their lives and lands. I was glad to hear this because back then, in the first days of protests of January 2019 in Caracas, they were thinking of fighting against the army, which had total control over the airport and roads, with their bare hands.

“How was your journey through Venezuela so far, Miguel? Where have you been this time?” asks Felix.

I’m telling them about my last month through and over the lands of Venezuela and when they hear about my experience with Marco and his foot, Arnaldo says:

“With this, you paid all the good things that happened and will happen to you on our lands, Miguel! Remember this!”

“I will, Arnaldo, I will...”

Next day before noon I’m landing in Ciudad Bolivar city. As I’m exiting, just in front, I can spot Jimmie Angel’s aircraft, El Rio Coroni – a Flamingo monoplane, exhibited as a proof of whom and
when the highest waterfall in the world was given to the entire world. I’m hurrying directly to a hostel from where I intend to download images caught in the last weeks, but mostly to hear Kitara’s voice. A short visit in a shop to buy some products made it clear to me that this country is no longer in a deep crisis. Comparing to what I’ve witnessed last time here, when shelves were completely empty, now situation improved visibly. I’m going at the same hostel which sheltered me last time, an exquisite Spanish colonial villa with wide arches and filled with luxurious tropical plants.

“Hello, Beast! How are you? I’ve been so worried about you, especially after watching your video from Pico do Neblina! And very happy too that you made it! Where are you?”

“Hello, Esperta! I just landed in the capital of Bolivar County. You know, even to this day I can’t fully understand the meaning of those names! Why do you get to be the expert and me just a poor beast? And how are you, girl?”

“You’ll figure it out one day, Beast! I’m better now knowing you’re safe.”

“Are you ill?”

“I don’t think so, but I haven’t felt that well in the last days. Tomorrow I’ll have an appointment with my doctor to see what’s the problem. I’m guessing it’s just a bothering, stupid flu.”

“Might be, here is wet season and was raining every day. Please send me news afterwards!”

“Of course! What about you, where next?”

“I’ll head for north this time, last time I couldn’t see Venezuela’s Caribbean side, maybe a short visit in Trinidad Tobago. Haven’t decided yet.”
“Would you like to meet up there? Or in any other country from Central America? I’ve never travelled there and I really miss you! I can skip work for one week in a month from now!”

“Sure, you decide where and when and I’ll be there! I don’t want to miss this chance! I’m waiting news about that too! What about Tao, is he doing a good job in protecting you?”

“Always, I think he’s missing you too! We watched together your last video.”

“If he didn’t fall asleep, you can watch together new ones, uploading is running as we speak. And I got to meet again my friends from Canaima!”

“Wonderful, how are they?”

“Better than ever!”

“Excellent! I’ll give you a call tomorrow night after my doctor appointment, ok? I need to get back to work.”

“Take care, Esperta! Good luck!”

“Thanks, Beast!”

Next day I took a bus to Puerto La Cruz in the afternoon, but Venezuela’s roads haven’t changed much, so a journey here by bus, is better to count it in days, not hours, and for this reason it’s possible to have missed Kitara’s calls through places without phone signal. Sometime in the next morning, when signal reappeared, a message from her announces me she’s better and the doctor decided to run a few more tests. I’m writing back that I’m still on the road, not knowing exactly when I’ll get there. I’m hoping is not the case of a yellow fever or worse, Dengue. I’m reaching my destination late in the night thinking tomorrow I’ll find out more about her health situation.

“Hello, beautiful! How’s everything! What the doctor said?”
“Hi, handsome man! I’m well, don’t worry! My doctor takes care of me. I manage to get a strong flu, apparently caught me off guard, and now I just have to treat it. Did you arrive well?”

I can see and feel she’s not well.

“Yes, I did, but I was very concerned about your well being. You’re sure you’re ok?”

“I’ve had better days, Beast! I just hope for a fast comeback!” wiping her wet red nose with a tissue.

“I hope that too because I really miss your smile a lot, Kitara!”

She’s laughing but something makes her close her eyes and squeeze them, like she’s feeling a sudden pain.

“Mihai, I’ll call you tomorrow, I need some sleep. You understand, right?”

“Yes, girl. You have my hugs and kisses! Get rest! We’ll talk next days when you’ll feel better! But keep me posted through messages about your health evolution, please!”

“Sure, kiss you too, stay safe!”

In the following days her messages were saying she’s getting better with every day and just few more days of rest, without working, is all that she needs to get back on her feet.

I’m arriving in Guiria’s harbour to book a seat on a boat to Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, when my phone rings:

“Hello Mihai!”

“Hi Esperta! Felling better, beautiful?”

“Yes, much better!”
“Thank God, girl! You made me worried for days now! I’m on my way to buy a ticket for Trinidad and Tobago. You’re still interested in being squeezed by the arms of a beast?”

After a short pause she says, trying to avoid looking directly into phone’s camera:

“Mihai, about that....I’ll not be able to make it anymore!

Moments later she continues:

“Probably is not one of my best decision so far, but I need to take it! We ... I mean... I cannot continue like this. You caught me off guarded too; you understand...you’re smart.”

It’s not the first time when I’ve been dumped by a girl, I can take these situations usually without extra questions, but is hard with her! And a heavy stone called sadness settled in my chest instantly leaving me with shortness of air and speechless. It took me long moments until I’m able to ask:

“Are you still under antiflu treatment, right?!?”

This was the moment, the last moment when I’ve seen her contagious smile with the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth. And last time we’ve spoken:

“You’ll always make me smile, Mihai! I’m your friend for life, will we keep in touch forever?”

“Only if you promise me at least one smile every time it happens!”

A long pause...

“You are Beast, remember?”

“Yes, I do!”

“And who am I?”
I’m taking my time before I’m replying:

“Esperta! Esperta!”

“Never forget that, handsome!”

“Never...”

We continued chatting for several months, sometimes with hours in the first months. Every attempt from my side to have a live discussion was always rejected until one day when none of her social accounts were active anymore and at phone she was never available. After a while, every time I was calling her an automatic voice was telling me her number is no longer available. It passed one year since I said goodbye to Kitara in the airport and I’m trying to convince Camilla, the only mutual friend with whom I’ve exchanged contacts, to give me news about her, but the only reply was that she's fine. It wasn’t enough for me...
“Mysticism”

I was walking on a new trail which I’ve found it through the woods coming down from Bistricioru peak, on Romanian Carpathian mountains, just several metres from a triple border point of three counties Bistrita, Mures and Suceava in northern Transylvania. It happened five years before I’ve started my first long journey abroad. I was passionate for nature and trekking all my life and this country always offers places to fulfil this passion. Every year I tried to cover parts of its territory and I was doing exactly this, but when discovering your own country, is not only about walking and meeting people. I've always looked with curiosity and lots of times with interest upon everything related with mysticism. Anyway, everything which today is still looked at as part of it and didn't become science meanwhile.

It was a rainy day, started raining since morning and I was walking for two days already on a trail which started in Moldavia. Up there on the peak, at 1,990 metres, rain, wind and thunders showed their strength for all my fifteen minutes which I could bare. I got completely wet and wind wasn't helping with my body temperature, first reason for which I've changed initial trail with one through the woods. I was walking for more than two hours when I decided to check my map to decide what direction to take. Beech tree forest changed in one with lower vegetation and the wind was strong still. Was the middle of September and temperatures are still high during autumn in Romania. All four seasons have here their own unicity: winters with abundant snow and temperatures which make frozen snow sounds like cracking eggs when stepping on it, springs with enough sun to melt the remaining ice of snowdrop's tip, summers with sunny days which drive you to the nearest river for swimming and autumns with all the rich colours of a rainbow spread and
imbedded in forest’s leafs. Autumns bring also this type of days, rainy, chilly days.

My app shows I’m half day from a lake where a straight bottom line indicates the presence of a dam. All I have to do is to find a way to get in the valley below and continue downstream all the way to the lake’s tail where appears to be also a small settlement. Being my first time there and considering weather conditions, plus limited daylight, I decide to make this road next day and to find a place with less wind to set up my tent. Walking down the hill, looking for possible appropriate places for spending the night, I’ve heard a bell. From the place I was standing I could see the entire valley and it was no sign of a farm from where it might had come. A bit disappointed, I was still thinking that a coup of fresh milked milk would have been the best treat to rise my spirit and for my stomach a natural source of warmth. It was still raining, but much softer, when I found a place in a form of a cauldron, a perfect natural wind stopper, wide enough for my tent and a small fire, surrounded by small trees and easy to access it, completely covered in rich grass and small plants with colourful flowers. In no time my tent was set up and my backpack thrown in. It took me a while to start a fire, everything was wet and this makes it harder every time. I was keen for a hot tea and by the time water was boiling on fire I was busy picking some flowers from around for my tea when, from nowhere, a cow is entering in the clearing wavering its bell suddenly. She's followed by another one, much younger and with no bell. First one stops instantly in front of my tent whilst the other one continues few more steps forward looking for better grass. I’ve started walking slowly towards my fire where I had a cup waiting for tea and continued forward towards my guest with a bell. She wasn't eating like her companion, just waiting even when I lowered enough to reach its udder. During my childhood I’ve spent many holidays at countryside and I know how to milk a cow, so I started slowly for not giving her any reason to kick me with
its hind leg and in few seconds my cup was full. I stepped away and my benefactor went close to her younger friend to eat. Its udder wasn't clean and I had to use a clean t-shirt as a filter over the cup before I drink it. This took less than milking it, was so delicious and comforting to have a warm cup of fresh milk in such conditions. I went back to my fire looking with the corners of my eyes at my new friends feeding themselves, still a bit confused about what just happened. Minutes later they decided to make their way back and started to walk slowly while I was still watching them curiously trying not to make a move which might drove them away, or to be more honest I thought if I’ll lose them from my sight the “spell” will lift up. Bell bearer decided to stop one more time in the same place and in the same position. To me was like an invitation and obviously I took the chance for my second cup of milk. Immediately after I finished filling up the cup, off she went along with her younger sister, same as they arrived, suddenly. I still couldn't believe what just happened. My sleep, despite raining all night, was much better and morning caught me with the same stupid smile on my face, same which I had it after receiving the second cup of milk. I thought maybe I’ve chosen a place where, sometimes in the past, it was a place used for milking cows on the mountain, but on daylight I could see clearly it was absolutely no trace of human presence. Last night rain washed all possible hoof traces giving me no clue from where they came or where they went afterwards. With this awkward good mood I’ve started walking towards the lake hoping I’ll find the farm from where those two cattle might belong to. It would have been a pleasure to give thanks to their owner for their miraculous gift, but I was walking for three hours and... nothing. Finally I found a gravel road which was used by trucks to transport timber and from here my app was indicating another three hours walking to reach the village. Two kilometres down the road two deer jumped on the road just ten metres in front of me stopping on one side of it. Very curious and cautious in the same time, both were watching carefully every move
of mine when I decided to take a seat on a boulder on the other side of the road. I think I’ve talked with them for more than twenty minutes until they decided I’m too boring. In my mind already started to grow the idea that this place is somehow special. After this new amazing experience my next stop was just a few hundred meters before entering in the village where a bunch of horses were feeding themselves with wet grass from the banks or drinking water from nearby river which is feeding the lake, a perfect place to take a small break. My grandparents had horses and my main activity when visiting them in holydays was to take care of them. This is how I ended up loving this animal, the closest one to my heart. As I was watching them, one of the mares, a young grey one, was more and more interested by my presence, most likely her sense of smell caught my apple’s flavour which I was planning to eat it. At first very shy, it took her some time to make some steps forward. I've splintered the fruit in half for a better flavour and with the idea of sharing it I was waiting for her to get close enough to take it from my hand. As she was advancing slowly towards me, a majestic brown stud started to bite her gently from her hind legs making her changing direction every time. It was definitely a dance of love. I've finished my half of apple until she managed to trick him to get close enough to enjoy the flavour of the second half. This area impressed me deeply despite having this bad weather all the time. Name of this village is Colibita and it was moved in the 80’s to make room for an artificial lake which today provides electricity and water in the valleys along Bistrita river. I could read on internet also about the story of its old sunken church. Based on the principle “we never leave our lands” all houses were moved on the newly lake’s bank, mostly close to its tail. A small picturesque Romanian village with cobbled bad roads in which old traditions are still kept alive by not more than 250 people living in modest houses. Small businesses in tourism managed to grow in the last years although they were struggling to bring tourists through muddy roads, apparently it’s all worth it since it has one of
At midday always at the one and only one pub in the village centre where cheap booze is usually sold. When I asked for a hot tea, at least half of the room, mostly men, raised their heads in surprise. Finally, the waiter agreed to make an exception. I was in the right place but, unfortunately, they all concluded these weren't good times to sell. Until someone asked me my family name. That's Balkan spirit, always people who never met are questioning each other about their family, hometown and lots of personal things which usually western Europe tourists find it interesting, but uncomfortable, being considered too intrusive. It was an old man sitting by himself at a table in one of the room corners drinking his beer. His second question followed immediately:

“Was your father a forest ranger?”

“Yes!” I replied astonished.

“He's from the neighbouring county, Maramures, right?” and he continued describing my father’s features exactly. I was surprised like hell now.

“I knew your father, all of us did! How is he? How old is he now?”

“He died when I was thirteen years old, Sir! Didn't reach its fifty’s...”

“Really?! Too young! But he was a man as big as a mountain! What happened?”

“Just life...!”

“God rest his soul! After he left these places he never came back. You know, your father helped many people around here,
including me and my family. I haven’t forgotten although more than forty five years have passed. I was young then!!! Make me the honour of sharing a beer!”

“It will be my pleasure, Sir!”

I never knew about my father’s early working years and if ever this place was mentioned in our house, I was totally oblivious to it and it wouldn’t be a first. Several other people started to join us at our table and everybody was remembering something about my father. He worked here before the village was moved on its current position to let the waters of river Bistrita to gather behind the dam. Stories started to flow about how during hard times of this country, under the communist regime and dictatorship of Ceausescu, my father, as a forest ranger, managed to help families with firewood during hard cold winters for keeping their homes warm. Other stories involved providing wood for building houses which are still inhabited today and asking nothing in return, and that, according to them, was a rare thing back then in this line of work. After all, it was their land and the regime had strict rules regarding forest exploitation. An overwhelming feeling of pride started to grow inside, but I still needed to confirm this with my mother, she should know more! In this new atmosphere everybody started to give me information about possible plots of land for sale. By now I’m quite decided to continue my research, the energies which I’ve met around here and this “coincidence” regarding my father’s life here couldn't be ignored. I've been advised to pay a visit to an old widow who lives quite close. I was knocking at her gate for some time when it opened and an old man, barely walking, stepped out. His face was completely destroyed and his right ear was missing, his entire hairless skull and face looked like numerous flames of fire left their cruel trace. Asks me to come back later because the lady wasn’t home yet, so I decided it was time for exploring for a while lake’s shores where I found a large place covered with grass. It was the
perfect place to camp for the night also because clouds started to release here and there sun’s light so I’ve decided to settle there for the night. I was knocking for the second time at the same gate and this time a women, around seventy years old and well built, welcomed me with a large smile. She presented herself as Maria Preda and invited me in. After passing through the same Balkan’s way of knowing with whom we were talking to, only afterwards she’s asking the reason of my visit. Her last and third husband died recently and inherited a few plots which she was intending to sell because, unfortunately, she doesn't have heirs. We agreed to have a look next day in the morning and just before i was preparing to say good night, her invitation to dinner came exactly when my stomach started to scream for some food. With this culinary occasion I’ve found out the previous scary man is an old “sluga” whom she took in for sheltering his final days. “Sluga” term is somewhat similar with “slave" and defines a certain person who during its entire life chooses to work, in farms usually, in exchange for shelter, food end sometimes some money. I avoided asking about his story, a painful one for sure.

On my way back to my tent I was anxious to talk with my mother:

“ Hi mom, how are you?”

“I'm well, dear! I tried yesterday to call you, but I suppose you were without phone signal.”

“Possible, yesterday I was through the woods of Moldavia, managed to reach Bistricioru’s peak in the worse possible weather conditions and now I’m in your home county, Bistrita-Nasaud.”

“It's yours too, dear! And where exactly are you now?”

“Well, that’s the reason for calling you at these late hours. Have you ever been to Colibita?”
“Sure, many times, but long time ago. Your father worked there when I’ve met him. Are you there!?"

“Yes, and you gonna enjoy too what happened to me since I stepped on these lands!”

She listen quietly my entire story starting with last night’s experience and finishing with the dinner which just ended.

“Mihai, what’s the name of this lady?”

“Maria Preda, why?!”

“Coincidences or not, this lady who you just met was your father’s fiancée before he met me. I found out later on, but never had the chance to talk with her. How do you find her now?”

“She’s a very nice smiling big lady! Probably because she’s cooking so well! We’ll check together some plots of hers early tomorrow morning.”

“Mister, I hope you don’t think she’s better than me in the kitchen!?"

“Not at all, mom, you’re the best still!”

We both started laughing.

“How come we never discussed about that at home?"

“There’s no specific reason, it just happened not to be among our topics! How do you feel, dear?”

“I still find it hard to believe what just happened in the last 24 hours! Mom, to me is no longer about coincidences; I’m seriously thinking of buying a piece of land here! Don’t worry, I’ll be fine! Thank you, mom, and good night!”

“Good night, dear! May God keep you safe!”
Long time after midnight I managed to have some sleep and early in the morning I was woke up by rooster’s songs from nearby residences. For the third time I was knocking at the same gate, this time with less optimism and not knowing why at that point. In three hours we've visited three properties, none of them appeared to be what I was looking for although this walk was a very good way to discover the village. I did ask her while walking:

“Did you know my father, Maria?”

She just nodded avoiding eye contact and lowered her head. I had a second question on my lips when she said:

“A long time ago...!”

And I’ve thrown immediately my pending question:

“How was he?!”

I’ve asked this question because I was genuinely curious for a second opinion, other than my mother's, about how was my father at that age and, as far as I knew, she had it. She stopped from walking, turned to me and looking directly into my eyes, completely quiet, started to smile. Finally she said:

“Let's visit the last place, you might like this one!”

I didn't. Before saying goodbye I hugged her and she hugged me back. Although I didn't really dislike her properties, it hit me why I began this particular day with lack of optimism, I like to believe that my decision of saying no was in line with my father's in her regard. And my mother would definitely approve it! It was also the last time I've seen her.

And no, I didn't give up, only three years later I was registering myself as a citizen of the village. My new property is a small piece of land in a valley formed by a tributary of Bistrita river which feeds the lake. Last property upriver and bordering Calimani National Park,
with crystal clear cold mountain water which is flowing next to it and another spring passing through it, became my new paradise. It has an old wooden house on it, a good start for transforming it to my own taste. This area is the land of evergreen forests; here fir grows like weed even though lots of other species are thriving too among them, creating beautiful paintings on a green background in the springs, when bloomed, and especially in autumns when their leaves bring out its specific colours.

It’s autumn now too and I’m standing on the patio, sharing a morning coffee with Simona. She’s a beautiful English teacher in the county’s capital, Bistrita city. Every time she has free time pays me a visit, especially during weekends. Here is the only place where I’m returning every time I leave the country for my travels.

“What do you think is happening with Arno? He doesn’t act normally since yesterday, have you notice it?”

She’s asking about my dog whom I’ve named Arno, from Arnaldo. His first and only love, Arra, is becoming nervously agitated trying to rise up his energy. Her name comes from Marco's smiling daughter name Arami, which in Guarani language means “my heaven” or “bit of heaven”. She's brown and white, he is black and white, but both with hypnotic blue eyes. Both are Siberian husky and they are usually crazy about this season, especially up here.

“You’re right, half an hour ago I’ve fished two trout from our pond, one for each, he just smelled it and Arra got to have both. And this never happens, isn’t it?”

“I think he needs a vet! I’ll take him with me today on my way back home and leave him there, but you have to come tomorrow to bring him back. Only next weekend I’ll be able to return here.”
“Thank you, this will help me a lot! Tomorrow I need to drive in the city to sign this new contract with the network and to meet the guys. Fits perfectly! .....And Arno loves you back too!”

We’re both laughing looking at Arno who was still laid down moving only his eyes when hearing his name.

“Only him?!”

She was looking for an answer which I couldn’t give.

“Ermmmm, no! No, no, definitely Arra too, but I’m guessing there’s also a bit of jealousy! You’re too beautiful, it’s impossible otherwise.”

A long pause followed. She’s breaking the silence:

“Are you excited about your upcoming trip to Brazil? How many times you’ve been there already?”

“A few...” I’m replying sipping from my cup.

Since I received this new deal, two days ago, the smiling face of that wild girl reappeared in my thoughts. Almost three years passed since my last visit there and still not one word from her.

“And, by the way, when do you leave? Will you be here next weekend?”

I was hearing the question, but my mouth wasn’t prepared to answer.

“Mihai!?”

“Yes ...yes, I’ll be here! We need at least two weeks to organise everything...and I was thinking of inviting the guys over the weekend to get to know each other better. Are you comfortable with this?”

“Of course I am! What’s about this time?”

She noticed again my late reaction:
“A few years ago I did in Rio de Janeiro a small video about the contribution of Romanian sculptor, Gheorghe Leonida, to what is today Christ the Redeemer statue on top of Corcovado peak. It should be a documentary about this marvellous piece of art and they want me to be part of this project.”

“Something is happening with you since this news! Is everything ok?”

“Ufffff, it’s just that... I have a lot on my mind now!”

I’m helping Arno to jump on the backseat of her car and not even his favoured toy which I’m placing next to him doesn’t make him react much. After shutting off the door Arra started to circle the car looking for a way in while I’m heading for the driver’s door where Simona was preparing to drive off, not in a good mood:

“The last thing I want is for you to leave from here like this. I really care about you, girl!”

She is looking straight forward as I’m saying this and turns only to ask:

“Enough to leave this forgotten place forever and come back with me in the civilized world?”

“You already know my answer, Sim!”

“It’s about her, right? She’s waiting for you there, isn’t it?”

“No, nobody’s waiting for me there this time! I’m...”

Both of us knew this discussion is pointless. She starts the motor and before pushing the acceleration says:

“You will never be a man for one woman only! It’s in your blood!”

As car runs down the street lifting up behind it small clouds of dust, I was holding Arra between my arms not letting her chase the car.
Probably she would have been chasing it all the way into the city, for the entire 40 km road length. It's a first for both of them, they've never been apart since the day they've met under my roof about two years ago. And both were so small and fluffy, looking like two balls of fur with round flickering eyes each. There's another family member around, her name is Spicy and it's the most magnificent white mare in the world. But what's quite important are my neighbours. Without them and their help with my animals it would have been impossible for me to travel, sometimes for months. Now, we all miss Arno.

Simona loves animals a lot, maybe too much, only her efforts made it possible to have Arra today. That's how I’ve met her and we started going out. We do form a couple in the eyes of still traditional Romanian society, but for us it is clearly an open relation. After all this time, when she’s not here everything seems deserted, she has the talent to fill this house with life. She’s a great friend too, which means tomorrow I’m gonna have a hard job to make her comfortable. We’ve shared many things together and we didn’t stopped doing so since. She's right in so many ways, in fact the idea of having Kitara waiting for me there crossed my mind. Arra comes in front of the chair where I’m sitting, looking at me curiously. Since this morning I’m wearing again Kitara's gift and I can feel on my chest the cold touch of harmonica’s stainless steel material. Seems a good moment to use it:

“Arra, please don't be judgemental! I’m doing it for you only!” trying to play a short song. After a while she just laid down on the floor and I stopped too:

“I know, I still suck!”. She agreed by waiving her tail.

“I have a better idea. Although Arno is missing we still can have a ride with Spicy up the valley and back, right? Let’s go!”
Next day, after meeting the guys, I’m on my way to the vet to recover Arno also because Arra was anxious since this morning and continued like this long after reuniting with Arno. Doctor was confident it's only a semi light indigestion which occurred after eating something which apparently harmed him. Arno wasn't in his best shape, but much better than a day before and the presence of Arra is most helpful.

Now, with almost the entire gang reunited inside the car, I'm driving towards Bistrita's city Central Park to meet Simona who also chose this place for our meeting. It’s a good playing place for dogs and that's what we were doing when both Arra and Arno scenting her approach, triggered a lot of joy.

“Good evening to all! He's better, right? she says while watching how Arno was thrilled of her arrival.

“Good evening, beautiful! Much better, yes. Thank you again! We’re hugging and when I’m trying to give her a kiss, as we usually do, she’s avoiding me. I'm thinking she's still upset for what happened yesterday, I have to try a little bit harder for making her feel comfortable:

“Let's have dinner, you probably are hungry too!”

“I rather not, let's take a seat here on this bench! I want to talk to you!”

She continues:

“I want to apologize for yesterday, it wasn't right to act like this!”

“There's no need for apologize, Sim!”

“No, no, I need to say it, please let me finish! Since I’ve met you I knew with whom I’m dealing with, you know?! But this doesn't mean I’ve stopped even for one second to hope all this time...“
“Until today, Mihai! Today I’m sure you will never allow it because... because it wasn't meant to be!” She wanted to say: “because of Kitara"...

“You do realise more than two years and a half have passed since I have no contact with her?!”

“Off, Mihai! I'll miss you! Invite me to dinner when you return!”

She gives me a kiss on my cheek and leaves suddenly. Dogs too show signs of disorientation looking at her how she disappears in the night. As for me, I wasn't that far from the same feeling.
"Life"

We’re flying over the Atlantic, my three companions and I, a seventeen hours journey. Guys brought a lot of equipment, all three of them professionals in handling these gadgets. I couldn’t close my eyes the whole time, Simona’s words kept me awake and by the time we’re landing on Rio’s International Airport Tom Jobim I’ve already made my decision. She wasn’t right on this, time is important, it passed too much time during which I was stuck in some kind of hope that I’ll have the chance to hold her in my arms again. My feelings felt patience and it’s not a brag, otherwise are not useful to me. I have to accept it, she chosen this regardless of all my efforts and I cannot imagine her choice of cutting all contacts with me was taken in heist. She must be happy now, Camilla told me she’s doing ok and my only decent option is to let her go, finally. But there’s still something which bothers me, something which is hard for me to fit in this picture... why? Having these thoughts, my decision of not trying to look for her is taken and after we’ll finish our project here, with the money earned I’ll pick a destination, maybe Patagonia.

We’re driving our rented van packed with equipment and our backpacks from the airport towards a hotel in Flamengo quarter, close to beach and with a direct view over Christ the Redeemer statue. It’s night already and from my balcony I can see it clearly. Sky is filled with sparking stars and statue's lights are giving it an air of a bright shining angel guarding entire world from up there.

Next day in the morning, at breakfast, all of us decided the first two days we’re going to discover city’s treasures and some of its landmarks, enough time to get used to the rising temperatures and the difference in time zone, leaving the rest of five days to complete our job.
For all of them it’s their first time in Brazil and expectations are high and for this good reason we’re deciding a good place to start our tour can’t be other than Corcovado peak where we’ve reached at its peak which stands at 710 metres above sea level using a train line. It’s always overwhelming to walk around the base of this 38 meters high statue. We are all feeling the same pride since one of our Romanians had an important role at its creation, that of fashioning its face. We’re already making plans for how and from where we’re gonna shoot our material. Sugarloaf was next on our list for today and before descending from its top we concluded that one of the materials should definitely be done from this spot. It was late when we returned to the hotel to have dinner and the guys decided a pub with local music would work perfectly. We started browsing for such places when in my phone results I’m recognising Camilla’s pub. It seems a good idea to pay her a visit together with my friends. They’re all agreeing to this idea and half an hour later we’re entering through Camilla’s pub door. I’m immediately spotting her behind the bar attending his customers.

“Hello Camilla!”

She looked at me and her face turned red instantly:

“Mihai?! Mihai?! It’s you?”

“Yep, it’s me and I brought some friends too.”

She’s coming out from behind the bar to give me a strong hug.

“You’re all very welcome! Let me find you a table!”

After setting everything carefully she excuses herself for returning behind the bar, promising me we’ll talk in moments. Music is great, drinks too and we became quickly passionate for the girls who were dancing samba. It’s difficult not to, these “carioca” women were built for dancing. Their curves together with samba’s rhythms caught the attention of the whole world, who doesn’t know about Rio’s
Carnival!?...although I’m more of a fan of Salvador’s carnival. And on top of that, their language sounds like dancing too! But Camilla is making me a sign, now she’s free and we can talk.

“Excuse me, Mihai, it’s a very busy night!”

She’s inviting me in her office where she continues:

“I’m very surprised to see you, although I’ve hoped for! How are things, crazy guy?”

“Is she by any chance somewhere back there? pointing over my shoulder and continuing:

“You don’t look to well!” her reddish tone reappeared.

“No Mihai, she’s not here! Let’s take a seat, my feet need resting! Actually, last time she was here, you were too! How long it passed?”

This took me by surprise.

“Almost three years! Are you saying she moved from here? Where?”

I’m realising my questions weren’t in line with my decision.

“No, no, she’s still here!”

“Camilla, is she ok? All I need to know is if she’s ok or not! It’s the last favour which I’m asking from you, please!”

“Last time I’ve met with her was two days ago and I don’t think I’ve seen her so happy since her childhood. She’s fine, don’t worry!”

“Good. Thank you Camilla! And thank you for your patience too, I’ll not be bothering you anymore with my messages!”

I’m heading for the door when she says:

“Wait, wait a moment!”
She’s in her feet when she says:

“Mihai, I don’t know much about you, but I know you enough to give you an advice which only you and this small room will hear: Go and look for her!”

I’m surprised of her reaction, why she will react in this way, asking also discretion. As I know her, even if I’ll ask her for more information, she wouldn't say more, it's like she sworn an oath of silence. But I declare myself satisfied knowing, this time directly from here, that Kitara is very well.

“I don’t think so, Camilla! I’m sorry!”

Just before shutting the door behind me, she shouts:

“Mihai, pretty smart those Germans, isn't it?”

I’m nodding my head affirmatively although I have no clue what she meant by mentioning this. A strong headache followed and saying good night to the guys I’m deciding to take a walk back to hotel. Some cool fresh air will help too against it. Streets are still busy at these hours, a good reason for hundreds of commercials to display their merchandise along sidewalks. This city is one of extremes, here can be seen the poorest place possible and people living on the streets in miserable conditions and after taking the street corner you find yourself in the most modern city with skyscrapers only to find another miserable place at the next corner. As I was walking, thinking of what Camilla said earlier about Kitara’s happiness, I’m becoming more and more confident that letting her go was a good decision. And it came back to me the reason for which Camilla mentioned the Germans: one meets twice in life! (“Man sieht sich zweimal im Leben!”). Not gonna work for Kitara and me.

Next day at breakfast i was feeling better, can’t say the same about my friends who partied all night. Apparently Copacabana beach is still keeping alive its old habits. I remember my first five days in
Brazil, first days of December with incredible high temperatures made me throw up like I’ve never did before. It wasn’t the best moment to share this memory with the guys. We declared this day, day of rest, we all needed some, and starting tomorrow we’ll be busy with our project.

From five days allocated to our project we managed to wrap-up everything in four, leaving us one more day for ourselves. These guys are incredible skilful with their equipment, making every frame looking astonishing. Drones, filters, night vision cameras, you name it! All materials came out wonderful and everybody is pleased. Last details will be added back home and it’s someone else’s job. At the end of these four days I was much more prepared to handle this type of equipment, thanks to them. We still have one more day together and we decided to spend it just walking randomly through the city. They hoped to visit one favela and when I told them they have already passed several times through some of them, they couldn’t believe it. Rio has more than one thousand favelas, the biggest one with more than four million people. In my last visit here this city was still under the fear of what might happen in the favelas which weren’t yet “pacificada”, i.e. controlled by authorities rather than drug dealers. First thing which I’ve learned in my first experience here was that back then, as a tourist, I was safer inside a favela than outside. All favela leaders had similar rules: doctors, teachers and tourists were not to be touched! Reasons are evident. Today everything looks peaceful...

“Mihai, where next? Have you decided?”

“I’ll spend few more days in Rio and I’ll head for Patagonia. It’s a good season for visiting glaciers and Chilean National Park Torres del Pine looks amazing this time of year.”

“Patagonia?! Seems far away, isn’t it?”
“I remember from childhood my mother saying every time she was mad at me: It would be much better to see you in Patagonia!”

“Yes, we all passed through this!”

“Guys, it was a pleasure! I’ll see you all back home or around the world!”

“Good luck and safe travels!”

I’m heading for a hostel which I’ve found on the internet, I cannot continue staying in this expensive hotel. When I’m travelling on my own, hostel prices are fitting better in my budget. And some of them have a special atmosphere, exactly like this one. Passing a gate with thick bars a pretty large roofed inner courtyard is opening surrounded on all four sides by buildings with multiple levels which are connected with shared balconies. On all the walls talented guests painted what they knew best or whatever their muse was, making me feel like in an art gallery. It was a surprise to receive a room where not only the walls, but the ceiling too, where filled with famous statements, poetry lines, drawings and paintings. This room was by far the most colourful one I’ve ever seen giving me the impression that no matter how much time I’ll spend here, it will not be enough to cover everything. But where are these people who are capable to create such things? I found out later on when the entire inner courtyard started to fill up with them. Mostly young, boys and girls, are practicing and exercising their talents: playing instruments, singing, throwing flames through their mouths, handling all kind of circus tools, working and putting their skills in handicraft works of art like bracelets and necklaces, anything which they chose to do for earning some money on the street. This is how they manage to keep themselves on the road, working for their dreams and I strongly believe that for these guys would be a torture to work for someone else's dream. I’ve seen this many times around the world, but here’s another level. My eyes rest on a statement written just above one of
the sockets, barely visible: “Trust people!” it’s something which I’m still working on. Funny thing though my best life experiences were when people gave me a “white check”. Last discussion with Camilla comes back in my mind. Why would she advice me to look for Kitara knowing she has the time of her life?! I feel myself forced to reconsider my decision, I’m realising I can’t leave Rio before I’ll find some answers.

The only place where I know I can find her is at her apartment or at her office in Niteroi. I’m deciding a visit at her office next morning would be more appropriate. Her office was in a modern building which rented apartments for businesses like hers and her associate. It was hard to convince security that I’ve been here before and I know where I’m going despite their insistence the office which I’m looking for is not in this building. One of them is accompanying me just to find out they were right, on the same door which I’ve passed through several times was written “LAWYER”. And I can bet on the fact she didn’t changed her career, at least not in this direction although security guard insisted for me to enter, most probably for eliminating all possible reasons to see my face again.

I’m exiting ashamed and concerned in the same time but on my way to her apartment I’m thinking in three years, changing office building, it’s not that out of the normal. Her apartment is close by, fifteen minutes later I was ringing the bell from the access gate into the building hoping she didn’t leave home yet. The sound of the opening lock announces me I can push the gate to make my way in. At the reception is a young security guard who seems bored laid down on his chair behind his desk watching a football game. But when he’s becoming aware of me approaching, jumps quickly on his two feet saluting in Portuguese:

“Good morning!”

“Good morning, Sir! How are things?”
“Would have been much better if my team would have won last night’s game, Sir! But we're keeping hope alive!”

“I'm looking for Kitara, she’s living in apartment number 6! Do you know by any chance if she left home?”

He’s reaching his hand to grab a book into which he's starting to search. After some time he’s saying:

“I'm sorry, Sir! In this apartment lives an old family and lady's name is Patricia, not Kitara. And I know they don't have children!”

“You're sure!?"

“Yes, Sir! I have one year since I'm working here!”

I'm starting to question myself about the apartment number.

“Could you, please, check owners names from third floor? Maybe I'm mistaking about the number, but I'm totally sure about the floor. She has a crazy white cat, Tao!”

He's checking again his book and says:

“No, Sir! There's no owner here by this name, I would have remember it!”

By now this guy is looking at me suspicious.

“Sir, I'm not a lunatic, three years ago I've been here every day for a whole month! Someone has to know something about her, neighbours or one of your colleagues? It was here an old gentleman who's name is Samael, if I'm remembering correctly, does he still works here?”

“Yes, we’ll shift in half an hour. You can wait for him here, if you like!” a clear sign he’s more relaxed now hearing its colleague name.

“Perfect, thank you!”
I’m taking a seat on an armchair thinking of sending Camilla a message to ask information about this. But I’ve promised her I’ll not put her again in this situation, so I have to solve it by myself. Five minutes till 10:00 a.m. Samael enters through the gate making me jump from my place:

“Good morning, Samael! I'm Mihai, Kitara's friend! Remember me?” trying to shake his hand in the same time.

He looked at me like searching to remember and finally shakes my hand affirmatively. He must know more about her!

“Yes, yes, yes, I'm remembering about you, Mihai! Years ago you've been here for a while, right! How are you? Miss Kitara is here too?”

What?! He just asked me what I was hoping to find from him. If she really moved from here too, I'm left without options.

“No, actually I'm alone trying to find her! She doesn't live here anymore?"

“Oh, no, she sold the apartment about two years ago! I remember also in the last year, before selling, she passed rarely through here. She is a great woman, isn't she?”

“Samael, for this reason I want to find her, do you know where she moved?”

“No, Sir! I don't and we don't ask such information! I'm sorry!”

“Of, Samael, that's not a good news. Is it possible to ask her neighbours? Maybe they know something!"

“I'm sorry, is against building rules. But I've met her last time a year ago on the street. She told me she's running a kindergarten...“Jardim da Lua” or “de Luz" here in Niteroi. I don't remember exactly. She was very happy! Haven't met her since then. Maybe this will help you find her!”
“I’ll try to find this place, Samael! Thank you a lot!”

I'm focusing my entire attention over my phone browsing for kindergartens in Niteroi, running a kindergarten is something which she always dreamed of. In results I'm spotting two kindergartens with the names: “Jardim do Sol" a bit farther from here and a second one, quite close, under the name of “Luz da Lua". I'm heading for the second one quite confident and getting there I can see an enormous building with a large courtyard where a noisy youngsters crowd was attended by a bunch of preschool teachers. At the gate I'm asked by two guardians the reason of my visit and when I'm replying that I’m looking for the manager one of them is showing me the way to his office where I’m delivered immediately to manager's assistant, an old lady who's inviting me to seat and wait. After a while she’s asking:

“Would you like a tour of our place now? Or after the meeting with Mr. Ribeiro?”

Last question made me wonder if I’m in the right place.

“There's no need for a tour, Madame! Just a discussion with Mr. Ribeiro!”

“We have a very good kindergarten here! How old is your child?”

“No children, Madame! I'm just trying to find someone who probably works here.”

In few words I'm explaining her how I got here and why.

“I understand. But is nobody here with this name!”

It wasn't like I didn't expect this answer, but still made me disappointed of finding another door shut.

Although pretty far, at the second kindergarten, I’m arriving on foot at midday. On a secondary street, in a residential quiet quarter, a
modest colourful house with a front wide garden it's one of the few properties which doesn't display barbed wire on its fences tops. I can hear music coming from inside the house while in the garden around ten to fifteen small kids are playing under the careful supervision of a young girl. She sees me at the gate and comes to open it.

“Good day! How are you?”

“Good day, Sir! We're just enjoying this beautiful sunny day outside! Are you looking for someone?”

“As a matter of fact I do! Her name is Kitara!”

“She's out for a lunch meeting! She'll be back soon! Would you like to wait for her?”

My whole blood went straight to my head making me dizzy.

“Certainly ...”

She's unlocking the gate and invites me in:

“We're playing a game, you're more than welcome to join us!”

“Thank you, but I rather take my breath on this bench under tree’s shadow, if possible?”

I'm noticing the presence of a second adult person, most probably a security guard measuring its size. We salute each other through gestures.

“Of course, I’ll bring you a glass of cold water!”

Politeness or just because she noticed my dizziness it’s the best remedy I need. Four benches, two on each side of the garden, surrounded by tall trees with rich branches, offering plenty of shadow. I’m choosing the second one on the right side, seems a good place from where I can watch better kids game.

“Here's your glass of water, Sir! And if you change your mind...!?” pointing to kids game.
“Thank you! Maybe later.”

She's returning to her little crowd. Girls and boys, somewhere from two to five years old are playing a game which involves lots of movement and laughs.

This fresh cold water brought me back slowly. After every sip I’m pooling lot of air inside my lungs and release it fast, like I was preparing to jump from a very high cliff into the sea. Placing my empty glass next to me on the bench, I’m becoming aware the music coming from inside switches to some kind of karaoke for children and everybody wants to go along. There’s a special energy among them when singing, jumping, clapping, laughing, hugging, dancing together. Kitara knows this energy, a good reason for opening this type of business. As for me, I’m still working on how to ignore their really high notes! Maybe if I'm focusing on playing their songs with Kitara's harmonica?! And it's working... for a while. Finally music switched back and everyone’s looking to take their initial place.

I'm leaned forward supporting my elbows on my knees watching a very well organised line of ants carrying bits of tree leaves with tremendous velocity just two meters in front of my bench. I’m following a tandem which somehow is managing to synchronize themselves to carry a whole leaf. Two small shoes are stopping just on the other side of this little ant’s highway. It's a small blonde kid who's starting carefully to pass, one by one, his feet over it under the close attention of the big guy. Now, with both feet on the other side is turning and bends to look closer at the ants. Getting back again he looks towards the big guy gesturing that ants are safe and well, triggering everybody's laughs. Turns again towards me and starts walking a bit unsure on his steps. I'm reaching my hand forward:

“Hello you little ant lover! What can I do for you, Sir?!”

Before I have the chance to understand he's interested in Kitara's harmonica, he’s already grabbing it in his fist pooling slowly.
Big guy’s gestures tell me it’s fine if I’ll hold him in my arms so I’m placing him on my left leg supporting him with my left hand. He doesn’t want to let go of the harmonica and giving signs he would like to taste it, as kids do usually, I’m saying:

“It would be best for both of us if you don’t taste that!”

Too late, he’s already with half of it in his mouth. He’s laughing, I’m laughing and if it comes to that, we may very well sing with it.

“Ok, kid, let’s try to learn sing with it, not eat it!”

He understands quickly and using his both hands starts blowing into it, mainly over or underneath it, but some sounds came out perfectly.

“You’re talented too, kid!”

He’s just smiling enjoying his little new toy.

“I think he’s got all that it takes to become a great musician, isn’t it? I’m saying.

“That’s for sure and not only because his...” replies the young girl but she’s interrupted by someone’s presence at the gate.

She jumps in her two feet and heads to open it. It’s Kitara! I can see her clearly through fence and gate’s bars. Once the gate opens she walks in sharing a hug with the young girl. Finally, her smile! She’s gorgeous still and her style is unique! I simply can’t move and not because I have the kid in my lap.

“How was lunch, Kitara?”

“Otimo!”

Sun shines into her shades until she’s entering under the shadow of the first trees next to the first bench. She stops looking directly at us and instantly, as if she lost her balance, grabs young girl’s shoulder for a stabile point. I’m not able to move at all, I don’t know what to
say despite the fact I’ve imagined this moment a thousand times in a thousand scenarios and none of them close to this one!

“Kitara, you’re ok?” asks the young girl.

She doesn’t answer and takes quickly a seat on the other bench covering her face with both hands. It’s the first time when I’m seeing her crying. All I can do is looking back at the kid from my lap playing with harmonica and who’s completely oblivious to what’s happening.

“Kitara, what’s happening? asks for the second time the girl. She’s taking off her shades revealing its eyes in tears.

“Please give me a moment with them! Don’t worry!”

Young girl agrees to return to their game but only to watch all three of us from distance exchanging looks full of concern with the big guy. From her bench Kitara turns her head towards me, forcing a smile which immediately turns again into a delicate crying. It seemed a long moment until she decides to join us on our bench triggering the attention of this smiling little musician who doesn’t want to let go of my harmonica. Her crying became stronger suddenly and taking the kid's head between her palms she's kissing him on his forehead and mine next without saying anything. I’m hoping a lot her moment is at least as liberator as it was mine under Canaima’s lagoon rainbow. Big guy, who until then hasn't spoken one word, with a young awkward voice of a fourteen years old adolescent, intervenes by saying something, which sounded funny in my ears given the circumstances, until I understood he’s actually talking about the kid from my lap:

“Kitara, your son is fine, there's no need to cry! Look at him, he’s enjoying gentleman’s harmonica!”

I'm feeling like everything is moving very fast around me and I don't have the power and necessary speed to keep up. I'm looking in her eyes to look for an answer, her face is smiling but her eyes are crying.
Her next touch awakes me, placing her right hand on my left shoulder nodding slowly her head:

“Mihai, you’ve given me a life! He's my life! And I couldn't...! You understand...!”

I'm feeling my eyes wet, tears are growing in their corners and I'm trying not to blink for not releasing them on my cheeks. I’m taking off the chain from my neck on which harmonica is hanged placing it on kid's neck.

“It's yours, kid, it’s always been yours!”

I'm turning towards her:

“Not this time, beautiful! You shouldn't have gone through this all by yourself!”

I’m hugging both of them while closing my eyes and when I’m opening them again I’m noticing the big guy who was crying too with a large smile on his face. My cheeks are wet. I’m kissing her softly on her lips and she's kissing me too and we would have continued doing so if we weren't interrupted by harmonica’s sounds. He's laughing with his mother smile.

“I'm going to show you my world, kid! And for a while I’ll show you a part of this entire world, the rest you'll figure it out by yourself!”

Fukin' smart these Germans!!!

... to be continued...